DISPATCHES *from*

WONDERMARK MANOR

VOLUME I.

by DAVID MALKI !

THRILLING TALES FROM LANDS OF YESTERYORE.
GUARANTEED TO PLEASE OR AT LEAST DISTRACT.

DISPATCHES *from* WONDERMARK MANOR.

With many full-plate illustrations throughout.

BY

DAVID MALKI !

VENICE, CALIF.:
Bearstache Books
2011.

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Wondermark: Beards of our Forefathers
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Hey World Here Are Some Suggestions (A Tweet Me Harder Collection)

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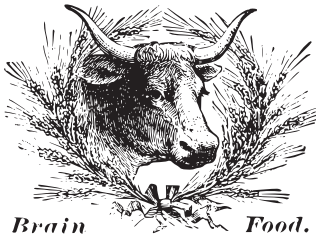

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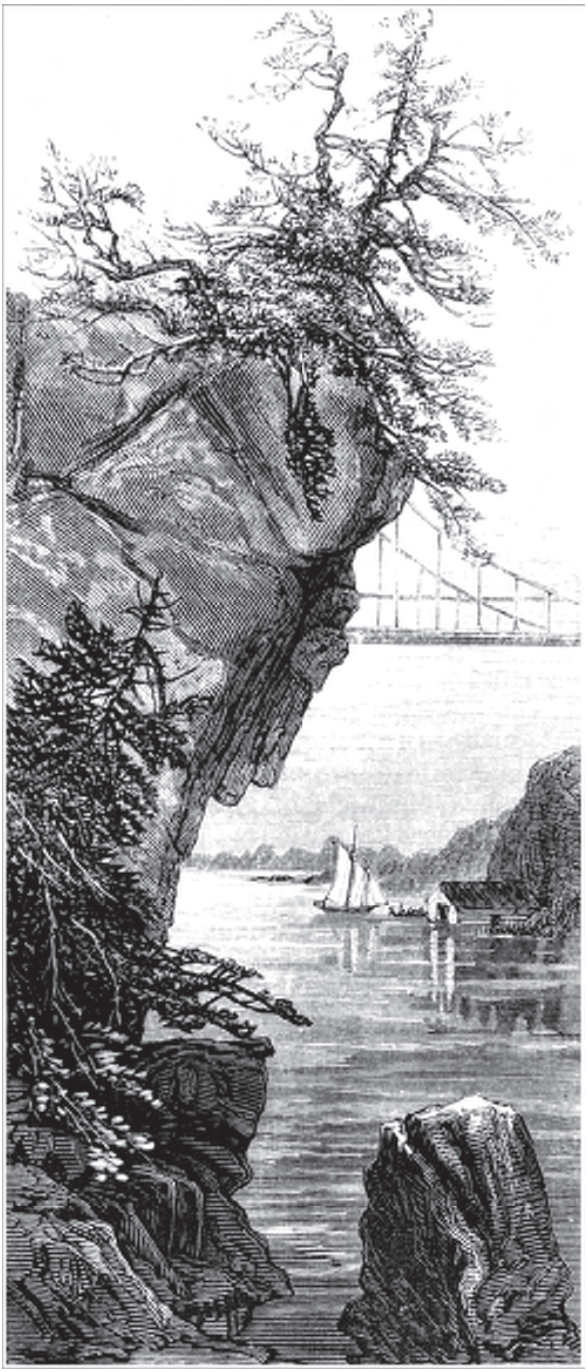
CONTENTS OF VOLUME I.
DISPATCHES FROM WONDERMARK MANOR

Prologue 7
Editors' Note 15
1. A Putrid Visitor 17
2. Gardening. 18
3. An Encounter With Neighbours 20
4. A Persistent Funk 24
5. Rabble 27
6. The Key-Ring 30
7. A Delivery 32
8. Bothersome Relations 37
9. The Great Purge. 40
10. Disturbance At Night-Time 43
11. Saved By Instinct 47
12. Remembrances 50
13. Ill Portents 55
14. A New Acquaintance 59
15. In Dire Straits 64
16. A Ghostly Presence 68
17. The Arrivals 71
18. Violence. 75
19. Grave Injury 77
20. A Shocking Revelation. 80
21. A Desperate Act 85
22. Unwelcome Visitors 89
23. Escape. 95
24. Into The Depths 99
25. A Shaft Of Light. 103
26. Return At Dawn. 108
27. Sifting Through The Ashes 112
28. To The Hospital 117
29. Confrontation 122
30. A Desperate Plan 125
31. Taking Flight 129



Prologue.

A KNOCK UPON THE DOOR OF DESTINY.

I DISCOVERED QUITE EARLY IN MY TRAVELS that when faced with a talkative companion, it is often good practise to remain quiet, thus allowing the other party to volunteer all sorts of tidbits you never would have thought to ask after.

The couple seated across the carriage had asked me at the cab-stand if we could share a lift into town: penny-pinchers both, from the looks of them. The husband (I presume they were wed, if only because I doubted any besides each other would have them) was the fat, long-suffering type, constantly daubing his forehead with a sopping cloth and jetting me clandestine looks intended to confer that he, like I, was *above* the sort of idle prattle blasting incessantly from the cake-spout of the beast chained by ring-finger to his side forever-more. I didn't buy his camaraderie, and not just because I'd not a shilling in goods nor coin about me; no, he wanted it both ways, Ol' Roley-Pole did—the social benefit of marriage, ostensibly proving to strangers that he wasn't a weirdo, but retaining a cynical detachment characteristic of bachelor-hood as well. I might have sympathised with his aims, but I detested his two-facedness, if for no other reason than both of his faces had dripped sweat onto my battered valise as we'd clambered into the carriage.

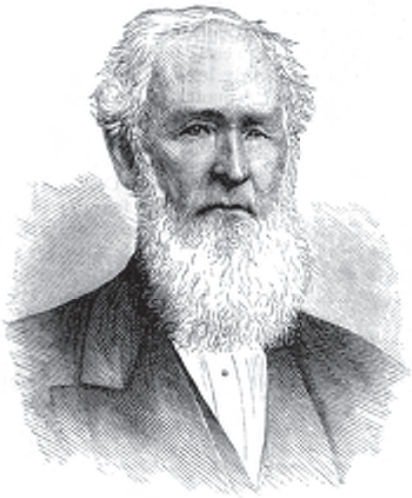
The wife was an easy bird to peg; I'd had her number from the minute she fed me a fishhook-baited good-morning. It was a candy how-do-you-do, all sweetness with no substance, extended purely for the expectation of reprisal on my end. I knew that given such an opening, she'd launch in and fill the air for the duration of the whole ride into town. But I'd just debarked a steamer filled bilge-to-balls with peacocks, and was in no mood for further yowling.

THE CABBIE.

Silence proved allergic for her, however, and she didn't take long to grow twitchy. Soon she was remarking on the trees passing by, or the foulness of the weather, or the fashions of the orphan-corpses that cluttered the roads. With no factory work to keep them busy since that great, flesh-grinding accident at the budget bottling-plant had poisoned thousands of thrifty beverage-patrons and resulted in great liability for manufacturers at large, the mischievous urchins had become a menace to urban travel, swarming intersections and snarling traffic for hours with ropes twisted 'twixt axles and beautiful mares trotted out to distract the carriage-horses.

Thanks to the endless spurt of noise spiralling out of Hades, up through the Earth's crust, and bursting volcanically from the throat seated three feet from me, I learned that a thriving trade of whelp-catchers had developed during my long absence from these environs, and that it was a "despicable practise" employing "far more knives" than, perhaps, were strictly necessary.

It was in response to this latter point that the beleaguered lard-mass poured into the corner finally gathered the gumption to interject. "Well, it's not *so* bad, really," he harrumphed, almost too softly to be heard, and I thought at first that the objection was purely a face-saving performance for my benefit, trying to look "cool" for the "cool guy." In any case, the nattering nag sped clean through his pipe-up with nary a pause for breath, though I had at this point resigned myself to the fact that the woman was inhuman and did not actually require respiration.



UNCLE.

"S-seriously," Role-Pole attempted again; "I think it's fine that they clean the streets of those disease-ridden brats. And to carry a cudgel in the service of one's employ—think of the lark *that* would be!"

It was clear that he was repressing violent tendencies. Surely he wanted to kill his wife; *I* wanted to kill her, and I'd only known her ten minutes. Even the horses pulling our carriage likely felt the same murderous impulse towards their passenger. But lacking the stones to carry out the act, R. P. was living vicariously through the scruffy whelp-catchers even now pulling small, limp bodies from the road-ruts, visible for fleeting moments through the thin windows of our conveyance. With one satisfying blow I could do the deed for the man, I briefly thought, but *why?* I stood nothing to gain; it's not like *his* companionship stood to be much more enjoyable. And it would serve my mission no good if I began offing citizens Willy H. Nilly on my first day back home.

True; once a resident of this city, I was now a stranger again—for the place had changed. The wharves where I had once hawked ropy strands of reconstituted cheese to tourists were crowded with smelly buskers and smellier seaman-tarts; the alley-ways were bustling with the sweating crush of an ever-growing population; and even the very roads were paved lumpily with child-flesh. It was not the Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats that I had cherished; but it was *an* Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats, and so long as *this* Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats featured as wealthy of an uncle as the Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats of my memory and imagina-

tion, then this Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats would do just fine for me.

"Ooh, there's where that nice old man lives," the chatter-box burbled perkily, pressing a smeary finger against the window. At first I thought she was indicating a post-box on the corner, and after that I followed the line of her gesture towards a bakery-oven. Par for the course for sense, I figured—but with a jolt I suddenly made out the silhouette of a tall château, barely visible through the late-morning fog, far off atop Waverly Hill. My destination.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the couple's stop was closer than the Hill; thus my plan to ditch them with the cab-fare unravelled quickly. In terms of spiteful comeuppance I settled for giving the woman a bit of a shove on her way out the door; she didn't fall and crack her brow on the cobblestones, though, so I did her cell-mate no favours there. His parting glance was wistful, so I tried my best to make mine mocking.

Once the door slammed shut I was alone in the carriage, and the quiet was like a density in the air, pressing against my ear-drums and massaging my contempt for humanity.

The cab-ride to the Manor itself was long, and would presumably be expensive, and each moment that seemed a capital chance to gather my thoughts I found my mind drifting towards a fear of the impending fare—I caught myself calculating wait times in dense areas, re-searching my valise for loose coins, and constantly arguing down my urge to simply off the driver and be done with it. But I had no use for a hansom-cab reeking with fatty-odour and scorn, and disposing of the body would take up valuable time, when I needed to see Uncle soon. My stomach churned—I'd been feeding it grog-slop and peacock-poop for weeks while at sea, and the promise of lucrative horizons ahead was making my gut-area antsy.

When the carriage rumbled to a stop, high atop Waverly with the whole of Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats spread before us, I waited for the driver to open the cabin door before budging a muscle, hoping that those few extra seconds might invent a solution to the problem of the fare. They didn't; nor did the ten extra seconds

SOME KIND OF WIND-MILL.

I took ensuring that my valise was securely latched; nor did the solid eight minutes I spent searching the seat-cushion for an imaginary contact-lens. Finally, stumbling into the glare of midday, and clutching my valise tightly at the ready with my striking-hand, I offered a lame apology for the delay.

"Don't mind it m'self," the cabbie shrugged. "You're on the ol' man's coin, I reckon? No worries from me, then—he's good on account, an' I'll add it to his tab."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, that's fine. Add it to his tab."

After a moment in which nobody moved, the cabbie added "Be nice to pay down the tab a little today, though."

"Nice," I said. "But not compulsory?"

The cabbie spat and climbed back up to his seat. With the crack of a whip that I initially thought might have been meant for my back-side, the carriage clattered away, and I stood in front of the Manor.

The path-way to that wide front door was long and effortful, but the trek afforded a good examination of the grounds, which were well-groomed and verdant. It was a beautiful property, and I hoped that it was kept up largely by staff—as I had no plans, myself, to do a moment's labour ever again.

The thick brass knocker fell to the wood with a reverberant thump. Voices and shuffling sounds emanated from within. As the moment neared, my heart began to race. Mission time.

"Coming, coming," I heard Uncle say as he approached the door. I fumbled with the valise and wrapped hot fingers around the thick oak handle of my father's blunt-edged hatchet.

Today, the Manor would be mine. ⌖

DISPATCHES *from*

WONDERMARK MANOR

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a MAP of EASTHILLSHIREBOROUGH-upon-FLATS

AND ENVIRONS

WHEREIN OUR TALE TAKES PLACE

Editors' Note.

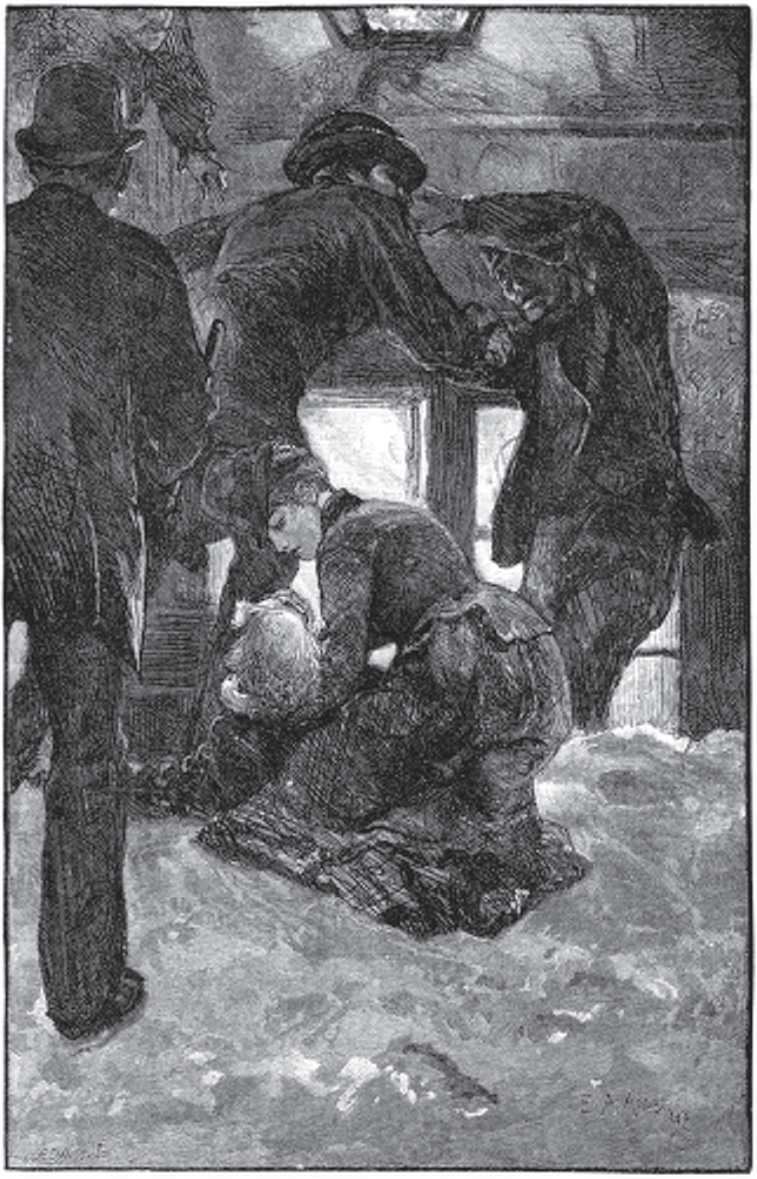
IT HAS NOW BEEN SEVERAL YEARS since the day we arrived at the headquarters of our publishing concern and found, left for us on the stoop like an abandoned infant or a notice of foreclosure, a battered trunk containing ninety-seven white wax dictation-cylinders.

There was no note attached; the only markings the trunk bore were post-stamps indicating a trip through India, Russia and Europe. Also inside the trunk was a scrap of laundry-receipt in an Asian language, the only Roman characters decipherable being "M.X.Y.Z.D." Also enclosed were three weathered cards bearing images of a phonograph, a crowd, and the planet Earth.

The cylinders, set up for play-back, narrated a remarkable tale. We first published the account serially, via electric post, to the members of the Wondermark News-Letter and Humour-Strip Home Delivery (a free service of the Inter-Tube Site *wondermark.com*), and have now collected it here for the first time in a complete and unabridged edition. We believe the cylinders to have been recorded as a personal journal of sorts, and so far as we can determine, the events they describe are true.

Our belief is that the narrator has aimed to give expression to the truth that within every person, even if humble or debased, there may be some good worth lifting up and saving; that in each human being, though revered and seemingly immaculate, are some faults which deserve pointing out and correcting; and that all circumstances of life, however trivial they may appear, may possess those alternations of the comic and the pathetic, the good and the bad, the joyful and sorrowful, upon which walk the days and nights, the summers and winters, the lives and deaths, of this strange world. Or at least we suppose that was his aim, because otherwise we have no explanation.

—*The Editors.*



"I RAINED BLOWS UPON THE OLD MAN'S FACE, AND FOR SOME REASON HIS COMPANIONS OBJECTED."—[SEE PAGE 516.]

1: A PUTRID VISITOR.

I ENTERTAINED A MAN-OF-TOWN AT THE mansion over the week-end. He was a rather shabby sort, a fellow one might see rooting about the waste-bins on Avenue T, that part of the wharf where the crab-smashers raise their mighty mallets and bring them down heavily on crustaceans with nary a care for who's walking besides or who might be gifted with the (rather prodigious) by-splatter of oils and shell-bits and general meaty leavings that cling to every nearby surface in a quite inextricable manner.

My guest, a certain Mr N_____, tried to keep his left side angled away from me throughout the evening, afraid, perhaps, that the tell-tale crabbings that stained his trousers would reveal him as a member of that loathsome cobblestone set, too proud to ask for proper crab-scraps from the smashers (a generally amenable class) yet too poor to buy even an eighth-ounce of rat-juice from the bellman's cart with the streamers, where the rats from the previous night's trappings are pressed and juiced with great fanfare at sunrise, the breeze plucking at the gay banners and lofting the bellman's ancient shanty from rooftop to rooftop in that great, old hallmark of morning.

I played Mr N_____'s game against him, I must confess, by seating him close to the hearth, tacitly inviting the snapping flames to consume the greasy crab-oil from his dress like it was kerosene in winter—and when the blaze licked his tweed like an ostrich licks an orphan (that is, with vigour and no small measure of carnivorous desire), well, I knew that *I'd* had the last word in this measure of wits. For what is even the slightest of social intercourse, if not a test of cleverness?

"Fie," I shouted, leaping to my feat in as dramatic a fashion possible; "your becrabjuiced coat would have brought no shame to

you, had you but held your head high and made no garrulous efforts to divert my attention—but instead your sly deceit has but piqued my zeal. Let this be a lesson," I intoned, and would have continued at great length and for the duration of several stanzas had I thought it necessary—instead, I saw that the fire was even now devouring Mr N_____'s earlobes and that the heat had caused his skin to liquefy; so it was with no small measure of irritability that I again took my seat, thinking, well, such is the fate of the working class.

Yet despite my unequivocal victory in that match of wits, the brandy in my snifter seemed sooted, of a sudden, with a certain dryness, and ash, and spite. My refined palate would not tolerate it.

And so, with a good and deliberate motion (yet briskly, so as not to be late for my afternoon squash), I poured the drink out for Mr N_____—that desiccated, steaming husk who was nonetheless the closest I may ever come to having a homie.

2: GARDENING.

I HAVE, OF LATE, OBSERVED A SPATE OF shockingly shameful behaviour within the halls of this estate: it seems that my own servants, those wretched beasts whose very existence is owed to my volatile whim, have taken to delirious flights of intoxication—much to the detriment of their designated labours!

After a particularly vigourous bout of cannon-the-sheep one recent eve, I sought my usual refreshment in the dining wing—only to discover the entire kitchen-staff crouched and huddled like feral dogs about a half-empty dram of oven-cleaner (a turpentine of mine own formulation, made from ground russet turtle-shells and the sanded filings of king-cobra scales).

The whelps whipped about with surprise as I stormed into the room. I disrupted their chittering assembly with a brisk remonstration on the foreign concept of *minding one's travails,* emphasising

THE MANOR ON WAVERLY HILL.

key points with the cracking tip of my father's old horse-whip. My fondest childhood memories are of his imposing frame seated high upon our phaeton, speeding briskly down the meadow-lane, bound for the church or some municipal affair for which business prescribed his attendance; his arm moving gracefully and purposefully back and forth, cracking and snapping that long tail of hide-leather upon the heaving, sheening skin of the eighteen scrabbling orphan lads who drew our buggy across the cobbles.

To be sure that my firm-handed discipline would take root in the feeble soil of the kitchen-help's attention, I made a messy affair of troweling seedlings into their very flesh—uprooting some prized bulbs from the upper garden for just this purpose, and making sure the ingrates appreciated the damage it would do to my floral display come Spring. I found myself half-hoping that the sopping innards of these fools would prove somehow fertile for the bulbs, nascent blooms that I urged to sop whatever nutrients they could from the lazy sweet-meats they now found themselves rooted in. What the talk of the garden club I'd be then, I mused, and how the society folk of Waverly Hill would beg to hear the secrets of my cultivation! I quickly buried the servants to their crowns in soft soil, with just the delicate stems and petals protruding from the surface—I would let the blooms find their full majesty and then, come Spring, with a flourish I would pull their whole roots from the earth and reveal my genius method!

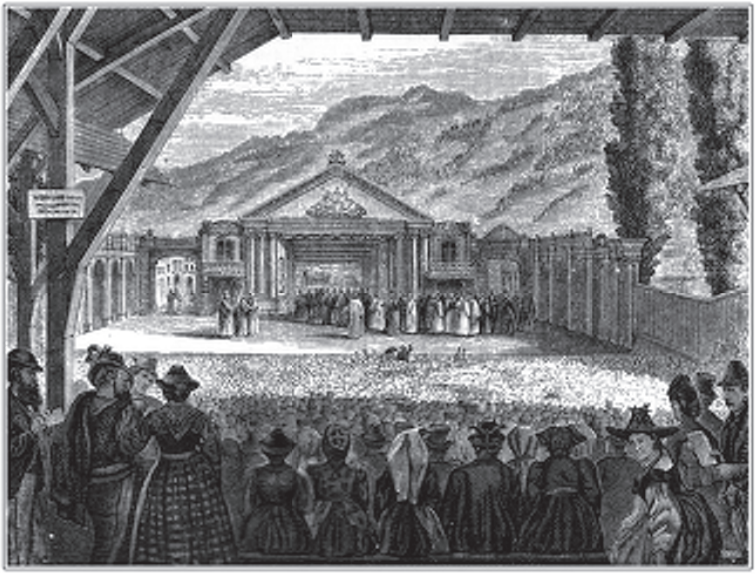
Alas, when I put my plan to action, the crane-and-lever system I'd devised failed spectacularly (cursed rotting timber!), and dark, sinewy skeletons that had spent the better part of the winter beneath the soil suddenly rained like clattering hail directly onto the society folk of Waverly Hill. It will take my whole cunning to manage an invitation to the Summer Garden Show now.

3: AN ENCOUNTER WITH NEIGHBOURS.

ONE NIGHT NOT LONG PAST, I WAS enjoying a rousing bout of brand-the-waif in the parlour when a frightful thumping-about sounded at the Manor's front door. As I'd already sent Armand the porch-boy to his quarters in shame (punishment for the withdrawal of his kin from the aforementioned romp), I reluctantly set down my blistering poker, gathered about myself my cloak and night-tweeds, and trudged that long, heavy distance to the door with nary a pony to bear my weight.

Wary of prowlers, salesmen, and religious types, who in past had weighed down this portico at hours later even than this (and several scalps of which now adorned my smoking-room shelf), I peered through the panes to find several members of the Committee for Genteel Relations among Neighbours, a local do-gooder group whose noses I'd long been espied along the narrow edges of. These brigands would fain demand tribute from each home on Waverly Hill, in exchange for invitations to their regular luncheons and teas, tedious affairs all that I imagined I would dispatch a flaming zeppelin into if it wouldn't adversely affect the neighbourhood's equity.

The doddering specimens persisted in pounding away until I flung the door wide and stood guard across the threshold: "What brings you here," I bellowed (the effect somewhat ruined by a last-second voice-crack, thanks to residual excitement from the



OUT-DOOR THEATRE IS FOR NINNIES—[SEE PAGE 570.]

afore-mentioned vigourous round of waif-branding, my heart still beating its staccato rhythm at the thought of tender flesh searing into the form of my sigil), "and why do you darken this already-black hour with your dour proclamations?"

In point of fact, they had made no proclamations of yet, but I thought it best to head this option off at the fore; this took them aback, as was my intent, and allowed me to follow my first pronouncement with another, this even *more* imposing: "Speak! Speak, thou wretched beings; for mine evening grows weary and my patience thin. Why are you here?"

The lead figure, a gaunt, drawn Mr S_____, who had a face like a sand-weasel and an intellect to match, was the first to volunteer an answer: "We've come," he babbled, "to ask your pardon to conduct a search on your grounds for a missing person, last seen in this vicinity."

"Missing person!" I shouted, blasting them back a step, causing them to clutch at their scarves and stumble. "Any missing

THE DR.

person trespassing in these environs would have already been destroyed by my ridiculous array of laser cannons, pneumatic wasps, and wolves with razor-blade teeth." This last was in accord with the posters I had erected about the boundaries of the property to discourage flea-merchants and smack-snorkelers from stashing their mothy bindles in crannies they'd carved in my enormous garden statue of Zeus straddling a pelican. Such offences were common in the summer, before the sandstone became too cold to dig at with leprous fingers half-split from exposure. In one key instance I had in fact become quite distraught, as I'd had the sculptor already flayed upon completion of the initial work, and was forced to hire second-rate gravellers to repair the damage. It was a thoroughly inferior arrangement all round, and I had docked their pay at each instance that they'd snickered at my insistence on precise anatomical detail.

"J-Just the same," Mr S_____ gulped at me, looking for all the world like a carp-trout high on speed-balls, as seemed to be the way of the excitable elderly of to-day—"could we take a brief look 'round? For they won't let us return without some perfunctory investigation."

Fearing that it was the only way to satisfy their gibbering curiosity, I at last relented, and accompanied the Committee on a perambulation about the grounds. They peered this way and that, shining their lanterns into the hollows of trees and towards oddly-

shaped earth-mounds and of course sneaking long glances at Zeus's mighty extravagance, and just when I was quite ready to show them the gate and ram the point home with a rusty spade dipped in cholera that I kept for precisely such situations, I was aghast to discover *a small figure,* huddled in a makeshift trench and covered with mud and debris.

"Is this your person?" I called.

Mr S_____ and his loathsome entourage quickly hobbled over and confirmed that yes, this was the runaway; to their credit, they thanked me profusely as they wrestled the recalcitrant refugee to his feet and escorted him firmly past the bounds of my dominion. I watched them the whole lurching way, ensuring they didn't break ranks at the last instant and dart for the nook 'twixt the pelican's loins—but they continued steadily, more hastily with each step.

Just before I turned my body to the building and my thoughts once again to burning my emblem into quivering, living meat, the briefest flash of rippling colour caught my eye, and it took three long glances, two glimpses, and a full half-stare to confirm what I thought I saw. For this fellow—this *waif*—this sad being that had run from the Committee and sought refuge where he thought they could not follow—had a *brand,* a mark still red by moonlight that would cool to brown o'er the coming weeks. 'Twas a baroque ligature of *C-G-R-N:* Committee for Genteel Relations among Neighbours.

A moment later the troupe was swallowed by the night. I watched the non-descript patch of dust where they had last stood, feeling an involuntary smile stretch and creep and crawl hideously across my lips. It was nice to be reminded that we *all* had pokers in our hands, in one way or another—and perhaps that old Mr S_____ wasn't such a bad chap after all. ⌖

"GIMME FIVE."—[SEE PAGE 548.]

4: A PERSISTENT FUNK.

PICADILLY DEFEATED PADDINGTON in junior-circuit boulder-cricket, and the unfortunate result as the universe grieved was a foul, pendulous fog and a miserable, sticky-wet dew that clung to every surface like a too-eager monkey or a thousand Royalist leeches. The sun, shamed at having given those Picadilly brats sufficient light to bat by, hid behind its gloomy cloak and did not reveal its searing nudity for a solid seven days.

Thus, no brilliant sunbeams pierced my boudoir to herald the coming of morning; thus, I stumbled from the chamber in a groggy state sometime late afternoon and let any in my path have the full brunt of my foul temper.

I set out at once in search of my alarm-boy, who should never have let me slumber beyond the stroke of eleven. Historically this precept has been reinforced with fierce lashings equal to the number of minutes I had been allowed to sleep beyond the allotted hour; on this day, however, I found myself quite too weak to draw the whip to its proper length. I was only able to summon a few score blows at best, and even these were of a middling intensity, drawing less blood than a lazy Sunday-afternoon bout of shank-scampering. As the weakness was clearly due to my over-rested state, and thus the lad's fault directly (not at all the result of the three gallons of cod-oil I'd imbibed in shame upon hearing the final match result from an altogether-too-snide score-pigeon), I bid him continue on his own behalf.

I slumped *ennui*-ly into a chaise as he finished the job, evidencing quite the propensity for't—capital form, excellent stamina, obviously simply aching for such an opportunity to prove his mettle at the lash. *I must remember this lad,* I thought to myself, *come recruiting time for the spring whip league.*

Stimulating as it may have been to watch a top athlete at the pinnacle of his game draw blood on himself for an hour (each strike landing on uncut skin, I noted with awe approaching lust, until his back looked like a pile of red toothpicks so thick that Rain-Man would simply shrug and soil himself), the cloud refused to lift from my spirit, and I began to worry. A tough jolt of Da's sledgehammer-to-the-toe technique sent a brief shock of adrenaline to the ol' ticker, but the vigour quickly subsided to a dull throb, and even then, the ambient Vicodin always present in my bloodstream since the "experiment" made short work of the sensation. Likewise, a belt of rye whiskey rustled from the servants' quarters did naught more than make me briefly resent my own caste and simultaneously hate and yearn for the amiable leisure of the bourgeoisie. Noting its

effects, I confiscated the full supply of this tonic at once, and disposed of it in like fashion with shocking alacrity, lest the elixir continue to foster dark thoughts among the rabble.

At this point I am told I began to wail, rounding the parlour in ever-increasing gyrations and continuously making feverish demands for things unavailable—old friends long gone, perhaps, or particular items that I had no reason to expect would be on the premises (such as eighteen ounces of jellyfish-liquor; a child's boot, size 6, with the heel missing; and a copy of the American Articles of Confederation with all references to the monarchy replaced with crude but workably-accurate diagrams of my aunt's many tattoos). For reasons that escape me as fully now as they did then, I apparently dispatched search-parties after these items at massive expense, and when the first team sheepishly returned within minutes, clutching a child's boot with the heel hastily removed (for there is a cobbler's just down the lane, between the veterinary cooper and the goldfarmer's kiosk) I apparently struck them mightily with it and demanded they bring me something not so, you know, *easy*.

E'en now my malaise persists. This house is empty as a tomb, its denizens dispatched far and wide in search of whatever random crap I sputtered while deluded on jimmy-juice. No doubt even now they are scouring the wharf for the telltale blue cap of a jellyfisher, not realizing that this time of year only the poor and the lame and the politically obstinate have refrained from following the weather and the squishy-crop to the warm shores of South America. Also, I should probably give Aunt H_____ a ring, just to warn her—because it is very probable that my kitchen staff is even now attempting to penetrate the National Archives in Washington.

I suppose I should be grateful for their ceaseless dedication, but at the moment I just have to figure out how to heat up some soup or something.

5: RABBLE.

AFTER A LENGTHY ARGUMENT RESULTING in much vicious loss of life among the expendable class (who remain in my employ for just such a purpose, it should be noted), I was coerced into attending a lecture conducted by a visiting Dr P_____, some "learned" sort in the field of law and politick. The Dr (or, should I say, the *alleged* Dr, for I saw neither certificate nor stethoscope) rambled on at great length about the horrid state of affairs in Social Welfare, goading the audience all a-holler clamouring for "Change! Change," until they were all but scaling the church-spire and tolling the bell like a bunch of baboons left to mind a stack of brass hammers: there's not much they can do, but they'll cause an awful racket doing it.

I had been invited to the dreadful event because my boot-waxer's great-nephew was to bear the colours at the start of the affair, and my chap hadn't any transportation to see his lad's big day—it would be a stretch to say that I had *volunteered* my own carriage for the evening, but in point of fact after many hours of his wailing and bawling and threatening the patent-leather finish with a nasty cadre of awls and augers, I did relent and decide to accompany the man into town. Should the evening go well, I was promised, I would see my footwear again. As it turned out, the grand-nephew had been shanked by a thug en route to the Hall, and was in fact spending the lecture bleeding in a rotted alley-way, but as we didn't find this out till some days later we proceeded at once to the event via the normal route.

I hadn't been down Admiralty Way since I'd been a ropy young cheese-twirler, hawking steaming yellow ribbons of Gouda and sun-aged Jarlsberg and fresh-scraped Fromunda from an oaken smoke-trunk strapped to my then-significant torso. I'd trawl the haberdasheries and the society salons, hoping to find a parched

young dairy fan or a corpulent lady who'd long ago given up the corset. It was a hard life, to be sure; the competition was stiff even among other cheese-men (each with his own gimmick—Johnny Fresca used to claim that his wares were "fresh from the feast," meaning he'd scavenged from scraps thrown into the alley behind the Baron's kitchen) to say nothing of the other hawkers and shills and street-wags that crowded you for space and shoved their rancid goop at every mark they figured might have a loose shilling in his vest-pocket. That was when I'd left this town for a spell in Peru—but the life of a cheeser in the guano-caves is tougher yet.

It was a life I'd not been reluctant to leave behind. When an opportunity arose for me to murder my uncle for his massive inheritance, I did it with a spring in my step and a hatchet in my hand, wearing the very leather boots that my impertinent wax-man now held hostage in his stinking hovel.

Perhaps it was because of my years spent elbowing my way through the same cutthroat (and cutpurse, and cutbuttock) street-level world that the besuited and bemonocled set claimed to be Expert in that I held no stock in, nor interest for, so-called "reformers" such as Dr P_____. The Dr spoke at great length about the need for "bottom-up change," repairing the ills of society from what he perceived as their source—in essence, eradicating the "unseemly" classes whole-sale with extreme prejudice and battle-axes. While I was no stranger to the salving effect of indiscriminate murder, it dawned on me that the Dr perceived his proposed purge as a *social good*—and murder couched in *policy* has hardly the rewarding flavour of murder exercised simply as *pastime*.

And so the Dr blathered on, seeming to get off on the roaring support of the crowd. Once I realised that he had no interest in homicide's *æsthetic* dimension, I knew that it was time to disassemble his argument and de-podium his ego. For torment does not have to be fleshly to be gratifying.

"Tell me, sir," I bellowed, angling myself for maximal acoustic range (a trick I had developed with a cheese-pole in my sunburnt fist)—"Tell me, what is to stop the 'bottom,' as you so call it, from

rising 'up' to seize control of these very institutions that threaten to help them?"

The room was silent in an instant. No one had yet dared call out Dr P_____ on his poppycock platitudes and empty bargains. He adjusted his junk nervously, then addressed me directly.

"I'm not sure why you think they would react with such hostility to programmes and initiatives designed to benefit them," he said. In response I summoned up a laugh that would have rocked the bowels of Hades itself.

"Help them!" I roared. "We can help them by buying their cheese-wands, or scratching a hard-to-itch spot for them. Help them by putting their children to work earning a living in the factories, or giving them sixpence to run errands that require small bodies in tight spaces. But do not, sir"—and here I pointed a quivering finger, largely to watch the expressions on those seated nearby turn from bemusement to aghastment—"do not presume that they are lacking in the courage, the wherewithal, or the ingenious mercenary spite to graciously accept your hand up and then judo-flip you over their shoulder and into the path of a speeding autobus, or off a cliff, or maybe under a horse or something."

I left the lecture hall with vigour in my step and flourishing my awesome cape. (The discussion had continued for some time after my impromptu polemic, but I had stopped listening immediately after delivering my own opinion.) As I crossed the gaslit lane to mount my carriage, my gaze drifted into the shadowy alleys beyond the shallow pool of flickering light.

I had left that life behind for a reason. It was no way to live, always watching over one's shoulder expecting a shiv in the ribs for merely rubbing a man's toes in a friendly fashion, or for nicking his socks in a pinch. That life was one without servants, or port wine (besides what could be wrung from one's hair when one took a wild, naked run through the distillery in summer), or gigantic, ridiculous statuary of Zeus mounting a pelican, or brutality exercised as sport. It was a life not hardly worth living.

Unlike the Dr and his sheepish congregation, I *knew* what the wretches of Admiralty Way were capable of. I understood the cunning and hatred that the street honed in one's œsophagus. And now that I was no longer one of them, I knew that their eyes watched me the whole lonely way back to the mansion, my carriage rattling hastily through their darkened by-ways, my spirit afraid for the sharpest, brief instant before my front door clicked shut and locked against the darkness.

Beneath great grey mounds of night, I imagined, they were swivelling their yellow eyes and huddling beneath their thick, besmallpoxed blankets, coughing their deep phlegmy coughs and plotting their revenge.

6: THE KEY-RING.

ONCE EVERY GREAT WHILE, USUALLY after a particularly hearty swig of coot-barrel moonshine (brewed the old-fashioned way—by my servants in a marble bath-tub), I find myself digging through the old oaken bureau in my study and extracting my late uncle's great, thick key-ring from beneath mouldy mounds of old maps and tobacco-straws and spiked corsets. Without particularly intending to, I have on occasion let idle curiosity drift me slowly through the halls of the East Wing, where I may carefully try a key or three against the many rooms that have remained locked for the entirety of my residency.

Usually my patience disallows me more than a few rattling attempts at the knobs before I move to the next door in the hall; with near one hundred keys on the ring, I would be hard-pressed to suppose where all of their corresponding locks and latches might possibly lie. So many must be lost in the world, I reckoned, destined to forever yawn in wait for this rusted old ring of jangly metal.

But there were many locks in this hall-way as well, and there were many keys on the ring. Thus, on these odd week-end days when

the whole of the staff was dutifully concerned with steam-cleaning my bedding and toilette, I often find myself leaning my weight on the creaking floor-boards of the East Wing, the heavy mass of keys in one hand and a doorknob in the other.

On each attempt, I would try three keys in each of three doors. I suppose I could have stood there shoving scores of keys into dozens of locks all the day long until one gave way, but such a cold method seemed wholly devoid of charm. I preferred to believe that my spare selection invited Fate to intervene, should she decide to do so. I would never make an empirical study of the many keys on the ring, full of check-lists and calipers and abacusi and no doubt one of Babbage's clanging pornography-engines rolled into my front garden; rather, I enjoyed prolonging the mystery for as long as Fate deemed appropriate, believing that which-ever door (if any) might open on this day, that it purposefully led to something she would have me find.

Not all of the keys on the ring were simple affairs of wrought metal. Some were highly stylised, having been picked up by my late Uncle M_____ on his merchant voyages to the Orient and New World. Uncle M_____ had made his early living trading furs, but when the coon-pelts of his native Brighamptonshire-upon-Grime began to decline in demand against exotic Russian sables and Chinese dragon-sloughs and Portuguese Incan-scalps, he raised a modest sum for an ambitious new expedition. He was next seen five years later, driven bat-scat mad by the sun and the sea, but helming an armada of merchant ships packed to the gill-staves with delightful foreign treasures—Formosan muskrat-snout for the ladies; West African juju dust, to cure gas (or, more precisely, to defer involuntary expulsions by a fixed 46 days, at which point one is revisited by the affliction—but still, a handy tincture in certain situations); a full, certified dram of snot from a Hindoo fakir with a moderate head cold; and a slim shard of bone that proved to be the left fore-knuckle of Simon of Cyrene, rescued during a minor crusade that (rumours indicate) led him down the Amazon, through Darkest Paraguay, and at one point, onto the very surface of the

moon, which he insisted to the last that he conquered for Christendom—a claim none has been able to disprove.

With this newfound bounty Uncle M_____ was set for life. He established a curio shop where he hawked exotic merchandise and traded tales of the sea and far-off lands for piles and piles of raw seal blubber (with which he was secretly insulating the basement). At the end of each day he would pack the day's blubber into a waggon and begin the long trudge up Waverly Hill to the same estate that I now call my own home. His key-ring bore silent witness to those days of strange travel: here, a carved-ivory sawtooth; there, polished mahogany; and this—yes, this!—a fine bronze, the gentle green patina of which *just* matched the tarnished hue of the doorknob my fingers wrapped about now.

It turned easily. With a soft click the door swung open. Light entered the room for the first time in years. A musty smell greeted me. I held a handkerchief to my nose and pushed my lantern through a thick layer of cobwebs. What long-forgotten treasures would Fate's guided lamp-light finally from this dark alcove reveal?

I took three more steps and then stopped short. A dry mound in a chair. Dark, moth-eaten felt. Skin brittle as ashes. A gaze as blank as parchment. A neck split in twain by a single, ancient blow.

Right. I'd forgotten this was where I'd stashed his body.

7: A DELIVERY.

I SAW IT IN THEIR EYES—THEY WERE AFRAID to approach me, a well-learnt trait, but still they must have wondered: why does master pace so? What restless spirit inhabited his motions; why did he mark a steady, repetitive tread 'twixt the book-shelf and the mantel?

They attended to their various tasks dully, dusting the collection of Dostoyevsky erotica in the parlour or polishing the bronze

buttocks of Heracles in the foyer with simple, disengaged motions, the corners of their eyes fixed on my nervous marathon. I would have admonished them, with the serving-spoon if necessary, but today my concentration lay elsewhere.

Scarcely had the parcel-boy rapped once but I had thrown the front door open wide. "Come in, come in," I indicated, clearing the way for him to trundle his hand-truck through the jamb, its vulgar wheels marring the glistening floor-boards with the squeak of unvarnished rubber. I cringed at the sound of the death of that perfect finish—but no matter. One of the leering ones would give it a buff as soon as I had retrieved my prize from within this looming crate.

The sweltering chap—an East Yorker, by his inflection—guided the crate into the foyer and set it near Heracles' divine toes. I scribbled on his claim-slip and snapped for a crow-bar! A hammer! Any implement would do!

My sudden bark startled the bronze-waxer out of her reverie—she scampered back to whatever wretched corner she loitered in whenever she wasn't busy waxing the bulbous loins of the celebrated demi-god, returning quickly with a ball-peen hammer.

I stared at her for a long moment. This hammer had no claw; it had a ball on one face, a peen on the other. Neither could open a crate. "Do you expect me to smash it to splinters?" I growled.

Before she could reply I had buried the peen deep into her forehead. "Bring me a claw hammer!" I bellowed. Sometimes you just have to spell it out.

As the call reverberated through the North Atrium, I heard the frantic shuffling of a dozen pairs of feet rushing to search a dozen tool-boxes, utility-bins, and hammer-foundries (the one in the Lower Annex had only recently been de-commissioned, once my enthusiasm for the hobby had dimmed with its difficulty. Freaking *hard*). Within moments I had thrust at me a goodly number of claw hammers; I took a delicate pause and chose a robust model, glimmering with chrome and with just the right hint of scuff that implied hardy labour. With vigour befitting

a man of my hands-on quality, I applied the claw to the crate's lid and leaned my weight upon the handle.

At first I feared it was my spine making that horrible creaking. But no—it was the nails, slowly awakening from their woody slumber and drawing themselves reluctantly from the planks within which they had been interred.

Inside the crate was darkness. "Fetch me a lantern!" I cried. I was making stuff *happen*.

Flame in hand, I accosted the shadow, calling its mother various insulting names, but (like a true gentleman) restricting myself to those epithets I knew personally to be true. Within, I could barely discern the outline of a large device, packed tightly against damage with layers of saw-dust.

Saw-dust! The flakes swirled aloft, stirred by my exploration. I waved them away with my lantern. Then I thought about that for exactly one-half second before the dried shavings erupted suddenly into a blaze.

TURTLE-TURNING.

A roiling gout of flame consumed the saw-dust instantly, blasting me backwards with the heat, propelling me powerfully against Heracles' outstretched middle finger. The lantern slipped from my hands and crashed to the mahogany floor. The oil spread over the slick surface like dock-waifs over a fish-spill. The fire licked the walls; it licked the drapes. It licked Heracles, inappropriately.

I fumbled backwards, shrieking for water. My dutiful hydration-boy stepped forward from his alcove with a chilled bottle of Perrier and a swishing-glass; I had trained him well. But this was no time for sparkling pretentiousness. I heaved the lad full-force into the conflagration, hoping to staunch the blaze's ravenous appetite for misery. The heat-monster hissed, then spat; the lad went down without a cry, and I wondered for the briefest of seconds: if I hadn't cut his tongue out for telling idle mule-tales about his hee-haw days and high-burro time at the peasant-infested fairgrounds—would he have screamed?

But now was not the time for idle speculation! The blaze had reached the powder-kegs. I cringed as the tongues of flame enveloped the barrel-staves and dissolved the joint-pitch that held them tightly sealed.

The staves fell free. The powder billowed forth in great, cloudy bursts, settling heavily over the room.

With a sputter, and a hiss, and a final, angry crackle, the fire went out.

I peeked through my fingers. The room was empty; the staff had fled for their miserable lives. The charred skeleton with the ball-peen hammer lodged firmly in its skull tangled around my ankles as I approached the blackened kegs, as if pulling me back. I pulverised the thing against Heracles and approached the barrels. What luck! Fire-retardant powder in the North Atrium! How lucky that I hadn't disturbed these drums since my brief dally with open-air torch-juggling, those many months hence! Such was the foresight that kept the servants in constant awe of my worldly prowess. I ticked off "fire" on the list of disasters averted—we'll not have *that*

A CORPSE.

problem in here again, I wagered, now that we'd had it once and kicked it off yelping.

I ran the powder between my fingers, its fine white silt stinging my skin with chemical. I dropped the dust and ground a last glimmering ember into the charcoal floor. The shortsighted staff would have long days ahead of them refinishing these planks to my satisfaction.

My attention turned to the splintered crate. The saw-dust that had caused this whole mess was now a fine ash, painting everything grey. Heracles resembled a marble ghost. The Perrier bottle was a white funerary urn, flecked with airborne charcoal. The hydration-boy looked like a terribly-burnt corpse—the resemblance was simply uncanny.

With no concern for the black mess that crumbled in my fingers, I pushed the husk of the crate's remains away to reveal the device that sat still un-singed in the centre of the havoc; my shining new appliance, its steel surface marred with dust that brushed away with ease. I saw my face in that brilliant shine; it looked eager.

I raised the lid. Twisted the knob. Clicked the igniter. This would be some barbecue.

8: BOTHERSOME RELATIONS.

I CERTAINLY COULDN'T FAULT THE LAD for enthusiasm. He gibbered wildly, practically slobbering with delight as he led me from hall-way to hall-way, room to stifling room; the entire place was filled floor-to-ceiling with mounds of horrid clutter passing for his particular brand of whimsy, and I was fast growing sick of it all.

This was Josiah, the bothersome son of an insufferable half-sister—a near-stranger who'd dispatched the whelp to my door with the fool idea that I, as a well-known patron of the finer arts, would indulge the brat's ridiculous notions. For Josiah fancied himself an artist—and a "contemporary" artist at that, interested mainly in silly experiments with foodstuffs smeared on paper and the creation of endless wax-cylinders filled with dissonant recordings of lead plumbing being played with a horse-hair bow. These cylinders I inspected with feigned interest before casually placing them near the window, hoping they would melt down into sad yellow candles of wasted youth.

He'd brought me to his squalid hovel to expound at excruciating length about his newest project, some flotsam notion that had caught upon the craggy reefs of his barren brain, washed up on the shore of an absinthe-fuelled stupour, no doubt. With each dreadful step he drew me ever-deeper into this cavernous maze of misery, his mouth never ceasing all the while:

"I see this being the beginning of a new age of connectivity," he gushed, "where you and me and whoever else *gets it* can just take interpersonal relationships to a whole new level. See, what are we *missing* as a people? We already have verbal communication. We already have body language. We already have written communica-

tion. And *still* there are misunderstandings, problems when people just don't *get* each other."

I shook my head with dismay and rubbed my brow distressedly. My scalp was beginning to chill from the sheer idiocy of his breath. Josiah had taken my hat from me when we'd crossed the threshold, ages ago and much nearer the surface, and I was beginning to wonder if I would ever feel that fine felt nap again.

"My new method is about direct *idea-to-idea* communication," he went on, his back to me as we rounded yet another mildewed corner in yet another dark corridor. I found myself wondering how the penniless lout could afford a property as expansive as this, but figured he probably made up the balance lad-whoring to Germanics in the eve—no shame in't when the purse is tight; we've all been there.

Finally he trimmed his lantern and hung it from a sconce. We entered a large room filled with mouldy tarpaulins, and being allergic to tarpaulins, I promptly sneezed.

Josiah didn't even bother to extend me the basic courtesy of a "God bless you, kind sire, and may the Devil keep and protect you." I wiped my whiskers with my handkerchief and narrowed my gaze on the inconsiderate sot, too busy pulling the heavy brown rags from several standing easels.

"Each core idea is represented by a symbol, with varying grades of secondary and tertiary ideas," Josiah said, whipping the cloth from the easels with a quite-unnecessary flourish that raised a deadly swirl of dust and micro-tarpaulin-particles. I flapped my hands before my nose but could not help but unleash another mighty explosion.

When I looked up, I saw half-a-dozen easels in the dank space; each canvas decorated with a series of colourful picto-grammes. Vulgar simulacra of true talent all; I turned my nose at the lot. I was trying to find the door in the flickering glow of the lantern-light when Josiah came darting at me, reaching to offer me a series of stiff cards. Dabbing my running nose with one hand, I took the

cards with the other, anything to hasten our egress from this damnable pit.

The cards were stamped with the same disgustingly-bright emblems as the canvases: in my hands, the three cards showed a heart (what treacle), a stack of money (of course!) and a palette with paintbrush (how original). Josiah's eyes practically begged me to understand with their fool-hardy earnestness.

"Don't you see," he said, "it's a whole new way of communicating. Words may be too surgical to express the full breadth of my meaning, but simple gestures or other visual cues may lack specificity. With the ideo-gramme cards, you are exposed to many facets of what I'm sharing simultaneously—all free for you to interpret."

I stared at his chittering face, then at the cards again. His concept was asinine. I could scarcely grasp the meaning behind the trio of cards he'd shoved at me. Was he asking for money? Claiming some relationship between art and commerce? Dis-avowing the same relationship? I raised my hand to dash the cards to the floor, preparing to immediately thereafter rain blows upon the lad until he led me back up to sunlight, back to my hat and my carriage and my home full of sanity. But he stopped my arm; caught my elbow halfway up. "Whatever you want to tell me, tell it with these," he said, pushing a tall stack of cards into my hand.

I tell you, I stared at the boy as if he'd grown goose-feathers. But it was clear there was no budging him from this wretched spot until I played along with his game, at least for a little while. Very well—I'd been in His Majesty's Dramatis Corps; I could certainly put on a game face.

I shuffled quickly through the cards, taking in their discrete images, looking for any appropriate to my situation. I chose a vicious-looking sword, a house on fire, and a skeleton doing a jig. Added to my hand were two horses engaged in coitus, a cactus with a skin disorder, and a witch drowning in æther. Then I found a leper-dog, and had a tough time choosing between it and the rotting corpse of Charlemagne. Finally I settled the issue by trumping them both with the Golden Scroll of the Lord's Judgment, rendered

in striking relief complete with tortured sinners and a writhing Judas caught between the Saviour's toes, and handed the fanned stack back to Josiah without ceremony.

His eyes went saucer-shaped at once. He looked up at me slowly, and his heart seemed to shatter even as I watched. His spirit left his face and took up residence in his bowel, settling firmly and uncomfortably, and affecting his posture noticeably. "I'm sorry you feel that way," he all but whispered, "but frankly, I've found that largely, Mother's been right—*nobody's* ready for my unique genius."

Meanwhile I'd found a large jug of umber house-paint and began to unceremoniously dump it out over his precious canvases. It was already tea-time, and at this rate I would never get my hat back.

9: THE GREAT PURGE.

THIS TIME OF YEAR, THE NIGHTS BRING with them a quite unseasonable chill as the heavy wetness of Spring-time lay a stifling blanket of fog o'er the low country. This night in particular, the windows of the mansion were steamed white from the inside, glazing the night beyond with a fine silk of wetness and warmth.

For in the Great Hall we endeavoured to make double-duty of the evening; we could both clean out some musty store-rooms and stave off the chill by stoking the central furnace with smelly stacks of leather-bound tomes from my late uncle's library. I'd never given much thought to that high-ceilinged room off the East Wing, its windows angled towards the winter sunrise; tall shelves crammed with dusty volumes never held much interest for me. Their spines cracked and faded from use, the gilt text long-since cannibalised for showy dental applications—why, who *knew* what was in all those books, and whoever could be bothered to find out?

THE LIBRARY.

Certainly not me; I had the heftiest plucked first, loaded into wheel-barrows for the bumpy ride down the spiral steps to the Great Hall and its waiting, snapping stove. The thickest volumes burnt slowly, the flame almost dawdling as an orange line gradually ate away at the dense leaves, stacked a thousand deep like the world's least-fulfilling tea sandwich. The paper curled like a spider in the heat; it was great sport to see how gentle a touch could still send the fragile skeleton exploding into ash.

In this manner we burnt Uncle's entire vast library. Not a single book was left un-consumed. In fact, once we'd gotten into the swing of the thing, we scoured every nook of the estate to make it a clean sweep. We purged the pantry of cook-books, the better to make each meal the adventure it had once been in the early days of Man. A stack of ledgers from Uncle's old roll-top desk, appearing to contain a hand-written account of his many travels into Darkest Africa during the Zulu conflict—gone, blazed to a cinder. The shoe-shine boy's tearful illustrated diaries—giggled at, then reduced to ashes. "Val-Pak" coupon books too numerous to count—thrust into the flame with something approaching glee.

The whole of the staff got in on the action, volunteering whatever printed matter they could find, fighting each other for the privilege of adding to the smouldering pile. Phone books joined bank statements joined Sudoku collections joined a piñata, for some reason. (While not technically 'printed matter,' the piñata was in

fact made of brilliantly-burning paper and besides, I didn't want to hurt the feelings of the poor lad who'd brought it down slowly from his sleeping-corner in the attic. I'd been meaning to have the beastly thing destroyed anyhow, so in a sense, this was win-win. A pity about the candy, though.)

After three days of marathon biblio-graphic bon-fire, we stopped to catch our breath, our collective chests heaving with the effort, our lungs choked with thick smoke and our fingernails dark with soot, a strange unity binding us once and forever with the indelible tattoo of shared destructive experience. We'd done it. We'd torched every piece of paper in the place. Towards the end of our frenzied crusade, wall-paper was being torn down in great sheets from the walls. Toilet-paper rolls were blazing up like giant marshmallows. An entire collection of drawings I'd made in the second grade was destroyed in an instant. (Rather rubbish anyhow—no sense of composition, shoddy control of the pen, and in retrospect, bloody derivative of the Ninja-Turtles.) We were exhilarated. We laughed. We grasped each other with charcoal-black hands and smeared the remains of *The Remains of the Day* on each others' glistening, sweat-slicked torsos. We danced about the flame through the night and into the next day, and when the sun dawned in the East the following morning, penetrating the fog for the first time all week, it gazed into a starkly bare room in which every molecule of paper had been fed to the flame. The shelves stood skeletal in the sky-lit brightness.

The next night we got cold again, so we took to igniting the kitchen-help.

10: DISTURBANCE AT NIGHT-TIME.

NOT YET A FORTNIGHT AGO, I WAS peaceably slumbering beneath my lady-hair comforter when a frightful crash startled me awake. Snatching a lantern from my doe-eyed lamp-man, who'd barely stirred at the racket (someday when I take a holiday I must allow the chap some sleep), I rushed to the veranda and gazed out over the North Atrium, where clouds of dust still settled from some mysterious impact.

At first glance, nothing seemed amiss, save for a few trinkets shaken to the tile and a few cripples thrown from their feet. (Which should teach *them* to loiter in the North Atrium.) Upon closer examination, however, I detected something most peculiar—a slowly spinning *wheel,* jutting distinctly through the Atrium's ceiling, having smashed its way clear through the roof-tiles.

I leaned over the railing to inspect the ground far below—sure enough, there was the debris, wood and stone and terra-cotta forming an impromptu burial-mound for one of those many doddering hobblers that infested this room every year, quivering, bebunnyslippered feet the only visible remnant of the ancient trespasser.

Just then the roof creaked with a sudden massive shifting of weight. I spied a graceful, shadowy form silhouetted against the night-misted sky-lights, moving gingerly from toe-tip to toe-tip, testing each inch of roof-tile before pressing his (her? its?) weight against it. A gentle *tap-tap-tap,* outlined in stark relief against the bright, moonlit night; I could make out a jaunty traveller's-scarf, dancing in a mid-night breeze, and even thought I espied the delicate seams and precise workmanship of fine kid-leather whelping-gloves. I shook my head to dislodge that last image, sending it crashing to the far-off cripple-floor. For surely my eyes had not *that*

acuity, at this far distance. I would fain not let wistful wishfulness over-ride factual observation.

Tap-tap-tap—the cripples craned their waddle-necks heavenwards in rapturous confusion, turkey-like, their watery, becataracked globes straining to track a vague form at the very limits of their perception. Yet who could blame them for pushing their senses to bursting? Their lives had suddenly grown interesting. As for me: I was none too thrilled about the sudden and indecorous rousing, nor the jagged gap that now yawned o'er my head, yet I had the most wretched trouble bringing my anger to bear against this most delicate of night-færies, this dark vision of grace from realms I knew not whereof.

Suddenly the silhouette slipped, and I felt a dreadful rumble in the rafters: with a terrible shriek of twisting hardwood and rending fabric, I spied for one terrible split second the angular shape of some man-made construct outlined sharply in the sky-lights—then the whole contraption came shattering through the lead-glass, sending rippling shards cascading onto the very veranda where I stood gaping. (Not to mention, because I care not to, the dangerous exposure faced by the league of cripples far below.) And then a mangled behemoth of wire-braces and triangular struts and flapping canvas came hurtling through the ceiling all at once, threatening quite imperiously to dash the brains from every last cripple indeed—but suddenly, quite haltingly, it *stopped* with a great heaving smash, its murderous fall arrested by the twin railings of my own veranda and a second, vacant balcony mirrored across the Atrium.

I am ashamed to admit that I shielded my head from the raining debris, like a scurrilous coward or a common marble-thief, or possibly a sooty chimney-tramp caught with arms full of mouldy beetbread and cheeks stuffed with root-sprung potatoes. Indignant at my instincts, I raised my skull henceforth back into the dangerous open, the better to espy this uninvited interloper, the figure whose form had so intrigued me on the roof-top.

A-ha! Movement! "Come out, scoundrel or sylph, færi or fiend, whichever ye be," I blustered, putting on my best Authority tenor

(though this particular voice had scarcely found exercise at this hour of night since my last dalliance with the Duchess in her gazebo on old Privy Lane)—

The figure stirred, deep within the wobbling innards of the smashed conveyance that even now swayed uneasily over the cripple-pit.

My first impression was of a tanned-leather riding-cap; this revealed a shock of white hair, snowy and mane-ish. Then a slim hand, steadied on the lip of the man-seat embedded in the contraption's centre. Finally, the figure turned to face me for the first time.

A slim form indeed! For there was hardly flesh at all on these bones; what meat there was seemed sunken to the skull like a vacuum-hose applied to a jellyfish. Eyes peered out at me from deep well-holes; teeth guarded a grave-yard of sorrows with their crooked tomb-stones of misery. The nose was hairy and gross. And the voice! Oh, the voice!

"With greatest apologies, kind Sir," it hoarsely began, struggling to wrench the very air from the room; "my navigat-ometer seems to have led me astray. See, I had attempted the first circumlocution of the—"

Not another word did I abide from that wrinkled jaw-trap. A fierce kick from my slipper and the whole wreck shifted quickly—until all that resounded from that rusty voice-box was one long, protracted syllable as the entire mess found its swift, destructive, and terribly loud path to the hard, cold Atrium floor.

Thus disgusted with the turn of the evening's events, I resolved to retire at once, to perhaps rescue some portion of my aborted respite—but curiosity got the better of me, as it has a favour to do in times such as these, and I afforded myself one last o'er-look over the veranda to peruse the tangled wreckage of my diversionment. The rattling old sop was *moving,* I noted with amazement—not running, not leaping nor skipping nor reciting the times tables in Pig-Esperanto, but certainly there was ghost yet left in that old meat-shape. Before mine eyes he seemed to find his feet—albeit

Mr bertrand—[see page 48.]

with a dodder that the surrounding pack of cripples recognised as perhaps too uncomfortably similar to their own.

So they were on him, rending his limbs and sinking weak, waggling teeth into rubbery skin and tearing the intruder apart; deftly, with precision borne of a life-time of bitter competition, feeling for the knobby soft points that rheumatism had scooped from each round knuckle. They popped the pensioner's finger-joints like pop-corn and spat the nails to the tile with disdain.

Within minutes, they had totally devoured the foreigner. This was *their* turf, after all.

And then they sat, as if nothing had happened, as if the destroyed wreck of a flying-machine had been their constant companion these many freezing months, as if it was in fact their own splintered city-scape, as if the whole grisly affair were no more remarkable than a slight drizzle during afternoon tea.

There they have sat these ten and more days, quietly inhabiting the wreck, making it slowly and terribly their own.

Perhaps if I tossed down some wood-clamps and glue they would fix the blasted thing and find some way out of here.

11: SAVED BY INSTINCT.

WHEN THE LION'S-HEAD DOOR-knocker roared its deep, fateful pounding, I somehow knew that the day was about to become bothersome. Each step down the velvety stair-case felt like submerging myself deeper and deeper into a clammy well of foreboding. When I passed the rising bucket at the halfway point I briefly debated sending a note up back to the world explaining my plight—but I sucked in my breath, kept on slithering into the dank, fearful depths, and when I eventually touched the doorknob it was like a stab of ice run through my palm into my very heart.

At that instant the dreadful pounding sounded again—*BOOM, BOOM, BOOM,* sharp and piercing, the knob trembling in my grasp. This morning's gentle sun-beams and cool spring breezes enjoyed from the high mount of my piggyback-oaf's knobby hunch seemed a thousand years ago. Swallowing the last of my late-morning Percoset, I seized the knob with purpose and flung the devilish slab wide.

The sunlight—blinding! I clawed at my eyes, letting something not unlike a shriek escape my throat. The snooty gentleman at the portico startled. His hand had been raised to resume that massive thumping, and at my sudden appearance he fiddled his snooty white-gloved fingers in alarm before regaining his snooty composure and folding them, snootily, at his waist-coat.

The man inquired as to whether he had the correct name and address, and I resignedly informed him that yes, I was indeed the one he had come to see. As he took in this information I detected a subtle but definite resignation enter his stance. His shoulders slumped a half-inch, before freezing in the interests of propriety; I have no doubt that should he have been given information of like

import in private, or rather in the company of any other but the very object, he would have fallen to the ground at once, a broken man.

As it was, however, he simply choked back down whatever bile had risen in his aristocratic gullet and extended a stiff, cotton hand. “I am Mr Bertrand,” he said snootily, “from the assessor’s.”

From the assessor’s! Those shiftless penny-mongers had been a thorn in my side since I’d inherited this property. Apparently my late uncle had accrued some outstanding debts in his time (no surprise there, the cootish lolly-wag) and his creditors have been quite keen to seize the estate as recompense. The value locked in these walls is the only thing keeping them from coming after my person for the sum, their purses flapping their tiny little pincer-jaws, straining at the leashes, waiting for the barest chance to lunge for my anatomy and rend it asunder until my veins spewed coins, or something.

And this man was here to report back to those nickel-hounds just how much value still remained as equity within these iron gates. To shut him out would risk his report indicating that the preferred target for their foul attentions was indeed my own person.

At this ugly conundrum I bared my teeth in what may only have been called a smile because the situation expected one. In truth, it was more of an expression one might make when the dentist prepares to examine one’s teeth. *Look, see my incisors, my canines. I am an animal,* I indicated to this man on my stoop. Yet I heard myself say “Won’t you come in.”

After a moment I realised that I should, in fact, step aside to allow him to do what my voice had invited him to do. This took some doing, but was accomplished. Bertrand crossed the threshold, and I could tell the instant that his eyes adjusted to the dimness inside—for once he could see, he shuddered.

Dutifully he produced a loose-leaf pad and began paging through a series of documents. I craned my neck for any clue as to what he was expecting to see. Had Uncle claimed some overly-fantastic value to the place that Bertrand intended to verify?

I tried to make out the writing, but it had been set down in some bizarre system that was foreign to me. Each word was comprised entirely of individual glyphs and shapes, and to make it worse, the glyphs were repeated throughout the page in different arrangements and varying order—the whole affair was impossible for a layman to decipher.

But clearly the brainy Bertrand had no such trouble, for he lay right in with a to-see list that sent my stomach leaping to my throat. The North Atrium (with its aero-carriage damage to the roof still yawning sunlight and rain onto the bowed forms of the cripples)? The Great Hall (with its still-smouldering pile of ash and book-remnants)? Worst of all, the statue of Heracles just behind me in the foyer yet reeked of ash and lighter-fluid and the late-night oil-fighting that always seemed to follow, seamlessly, after a robust cook-out. There would be no hiding *this* indiscretion.

Bertrand's eyes took in the sooted figure even as I debated what to do—while my mind raced, he made arcane marks on his pad with some sort of sharpened wooden stick that left dark squiggles on the paper. What he was writing, I could scarcely imagine.

And then I lit upon a plan: I would gamely offer the staid inspector an utterly comprehensive tour of the entire garden, which would certainly occupy the better part of the afternoon. In that time the staff could easily clean the statue, sweep out the ashes from the Great Hall, repair the roof in the North Atrium, re-upholster the furniture in the sitting den, shovel out the dogs from the basement, find a home for the Gipsy band in the bottom orchard, add a water-closet to the servants' quarters in the attic as the housing code required, and then deport all of themselves before Bertrand could ring his pin-headed friends at the Naturalisation Service. Yes, this would take a fair amount of doing, but it could certainly work—after all, elaborate, perfectly-crafted plans such as these were what my considerable reputation was known for. To action!

I turned to Bertrand, eager to set my plan to the tracks, and was shocked to realise that in my reverie I had killed the man. My fists were drenched in dripping crimson, knuckles torn from where

his teeth had (apparently) offered some resistance. The chap was a mangled mess atop the tile, battered almost beyond recognition. I stepped quickly aside to avoid staining my house-slippers in the growing pool of blood and fluids.

It has been said that often-times the body's instincts know what to do even when the mind is still reeling from the problem. In this case, my clever fists proved the axiom correct. I heaved a sigh of relief, and smiled for the first time in what felt like an age. Thank heavens I wasn't going to have to put in that bathroom. That would have been a bitch.

12: REMEMBRANCES.

IT HAPPENS TO THE BEST OF US: one gets too wrapped-up in a rousing game of swat-the-orphan-in-the-garden and one loses track of the hour. I should have noted the sun sweeping dangerously close to the far-off horizon, but alas, I was too enrapt in the frivolity at hand—such is the danger of beginning the game after luncheon; it often lasts late into the night, as the squat little devils simply do not tire.

It was the church-bells that reminded me of the time; they toll furiously throughout the day to keep the bat-creatures at bay. The Archbishop had issued the mandate after learning through bitter experience that only the resonant assault of those massive brass clangers could create the necessary disturbance in the sonic landscape that would disorient (and, it should be said, nauseate) the vile, winged beasts' airborne equilibrium.

The cathedral down in Stamps-upon-Staves had been under relentless assault from the vicious pests for months, losing uncounted bushels of communion wafers in each blighted onslaught, with no defence proving the least bit effective. The bat-things simply soared above pitch-forks, and proved not at all receptive to entreaties read from the collected works of St. Augustine. The order discovered the

bell stratagem quite by accident when, in an unrelated incident, a certain love-struck hunch-back hung himself from the pull-rope at the exact moment the flying beasts were darting through the nave. The invaders were routed within seconds, their keen sense of predatory cunning rendered utterly useless by the concussive pealing, and (so the report goes) they banged and flapped about inside the sanctuary, weaving and spewing putrid bile from churning innards, for as long as it took the abbot to cut the hunch-back from the rope and for the peals to echo away.

Then they left, it's told, amid much praise from the hapless, goop-drenched folk of the cathedral. Notwithstanding his smelly attire, the abbot had offered a prayer and a sacrifice in gratitude, then tracked down the lass who'd driven the hunch-back o'er the edge and made her a full citizen of Stamps-upon-Staves, her outstanding warrants for solicitation repealed and her name entered into the town register in majestic gilt ink (an honour redeemable for free cutlets at the cutleter's during cutlet season). The day was won, despite the fact that the cathedral of Stamps-upon-Staves smells of bat-bile still, and likely will for generations to come. But from that victorious day till this, the bells all 'cross the shire now ring out at random intervals to ward off future attacks.

Today, hearing the bells reminded me not of any particular hour, but rather of dead hunch-backs—which reminded me that it was time to feed my own, kept captive in the basement. I tossed a hock of indiscriminate meat his way and rushed to dress for my appointment in town—an important meeting with the municipal solicitor regarding my own unmistakable awesome-ness, among other topics as were sure to arise.

Within ten minutes the carriage was harnessed and ready; a mere four hours after that, I emerged at the door, irate at having only time for the hastiest of vinegar-soaks. Before visiting the town on any business, I'd taken up the habit of soaking in vinegar for a solid day, so as to pre-empt whatever odours might await me once I crossed the bounds of my estate. Largely this was to fend off the unpleasantness of that fecund set who made those urban alleys

CATHEDRAL AT
STAMPS-UPON-STAVES.

their miserable abode, and who thought nothing of saving their waste for later use as cooking-fuel or art-supply; but I must admit that part of the rationale for the admittedly absurd practise was to keep the tantalizing scent of twirled wharf-cheese from reaching my nostrils—for I feared losing control of all inhibition should a certain incident repeat itself, even in any minor capacity.

One week ago, I had no such compunctions about visiting the town un-self-odoured; in fact, should you be of a mind to suggest to me that I ought to soak in vinegar for eighteen hours before visiting the wharf, I would rightly have thought you mad, or a pervert, or else a mad pervert, or possibly a Minister of Parliament. *(Zing!)*

Yet six days ago, I had been strolling idly on the wharf-front, minding my business as wharf-strollers often do, taunting the crab-smashers with new-model mallets I'd procured for the express

purpose of tossing in the water to watch their sad expressions. I gave no thought to the rabblish cheese-twirlers (younger every year!) harassing all, nor to my bygone days spent fighting for scraps in that sad, ignoble profession...when a peculiar aroma tickled my hind-brain, that primal centre of lizard-reflexes and subconscious associations more powerful, more dictatorial of the flesh than any realm of conscious thought could hope to aspire to. The scent was a rare blend of cheese-spice and meat-funk, in a proportion I'd only encountered once before, in the Indies, during my great pilgrimage to the holy shrine of cheese-twirlers, that fabled city atop the Himalayan peak of Tall-Mount. (So named for its *ta*lcum, *ll*amas, *mo*rdancy, and *unt*s.)

At Tall-Mount I was but one of many hundreds of eager supplicants come to wait outside the doors of the monastery of Abu Fromage, that ethnically-diverse grand-master of the sacred art of C. T., hoping but for a glimpse of that revered figure. For six weeks I waited, as acolytes came and went, gave up hope and renewed it; I subsisted only on the cheese that I had brought, carefully rationed, and the flesh of the men I could kill while in the frenzied rage that the cheese began to induce after about Week Three.

And then—unbelievably—as I was about to resign myself to a painful and horrifying Week Seven, in which I was totally willing to begin eating my own foot—the door opened.

I saw naught but a silhouette. No face, no features. Two hands, bronzed with fondue-splatter, holding a simple bucket. Waste-water from some arcane interiour ritual splashed on the doorstep and on my person. And a simple, pungent waft of the most divine cheese-mix I had ever sensed with my senses.

The door was open but for one second, and the odour lingered for barely three more before it dissipated, commingled with the historical funk of countless acolytes and the waste-smell from the skunk-farm across the street. Yet I knew my journey would never reap more treasure than this. I picked myself up and began the long trudge back down the slopes of Tall-mount, slurping the soaked-in waste-water from my tunic and breeches as I went.

From then till now I had never so much as turned my head at a cheese-smell, having once known the graceful perfection that had been Abu Fromage's wafty wisp.

And yet. And yet, here on the wharf, six days ago, there it was. I pegged the location behind me instantly—this old C. T. still has a nose for the business—and whirled, but found nothing.

For a moment, I had entertained the thought that Abu Fromage himself had crossed the Continent and was now ten yards from me, but then I dashed the prospect from my mind. Then I mused that he may have taken a successor, someone younger who would be more prone to travel—this, too, was discarded as ridiculous, for *I* hadn't gotten any letter, and who else could he have chosen? No, the explanation was simple: there was a new grand-master in town, and he would have to answer to—*There it was again!* And *closer!*

Six days ago, I found the heart of the aroma.

Six days ago, I met an old leper, dying in a vat of discarded cinnamon from a cinnamonery, waste-cheese poured atop him by some ignorant child, his leprous juices mixing with the enzymes and the what-not and somehow, by some wretched alchemy too awful to even contemplate, his rotting nastiness produced a scent indiscernible from the most heavenly Abu Fromage delicacy.

Too grossed out to conceive of any other option, I had resolved to block my nose from ever smelling anything at all in the town ever again. Hence the vinegar-soak.

But now, this instant, after only the most perfunctory of soaks, I was still late for my meeting. I simply would not have it.

I disembarked the carriage, dispatched a messenger to reschedule the meeting with the solicitor, citing unregulated levels of awesome that had overloaded a system still frail from orphan-slapping. And then I went back inside to cry for a bit.

Far-off, the bells of the church tolled, and then were still. Before I shut the door, I thought I heard a faint *screee!* of frustrated indignation coming from the direction of the hill-caves. *I know the feeling,* I thought. You think you leave a life behind but it comes

back for you regardless, and the most elaborate vinegar-soaking (with crystals, even) can't wash away the longing.

Against the moon I thought I saw the fluttering silhouette of a leathery wing. Some had claimed they could smell the bat-creatures from miles below, as they passed abhorrently overhead. I don't know if that's true, but I suppose the vinegar came in handy tonight after all. Proof that all things work in concert for a purpose: tonight, whatever happens—at least I can't smell anything.

13: ILL PORTENTS.

I FOUND THE FLYER TACKILY TACKED to the front door: a gaudy waste of paper, splashed with vulgar-coloured inks and bedecked with the most garish of symbology. Pulling on the tacks hurt my powdered fingertips (I had spent the morning in the flour vat searching for meal-worms, as it was Thursday), so I summoned Armand, the porch-boy.

Ever eager to be of assistance, Armand clambered from his perch 'neath the front-yard gallows and plucked the circular from the door. The sun reflected irritatingly from its surface, so I shaded my eyes demurely. "What does it say, Armand," I sighed.

Clearing his massive throat, Armand read a long and rambling missive claiming that I was in violation of various housing codes and zoning ordinances and that I should appear at once before the magistrate down in town. Well, that was certainly not going to happen, not without a vinegar-bath; that had become my special rule, after all, and what good are rules if not to be followed to the letter at absolutely all times regardless of circumstance? (Otherwise, they might as well just be *laws,* which were clearly more akin to nanny-ish suggestions.) I plucked the paper from Armand's crooked fingers, rolled it into a ball, then unfolded it and deftly constructed an obscene origami—then dispatched Armand to deliver the paper-figure to the magistrate, no message necessary.

As his pumping flexors descended the drive, I turned my attention to the damage that the tacks had done to my front door. Whatever heartless fool had thrust his bedeviled points into my property had shown absolutely no respect for the structural integrity of the wood—two deep clefts split the grain in unattractive places. I stepped back to take a further look at the damage—

And then stopped short, my hand darting to my mouth. It couldn't be. It was impossible. It was just too inconceivable. But there it was.

A pattern.

It will be necessary to explain that my door had suffered a great number of bladed indignities o'er the years. The monks who'd once burrowed beneath my greenhouse had, at one point, nailed up a series of theses; these had left a dark gash in the oak that persisted long after their personages were dispatched to the hereafter by a series of crossbow bolts to the face. Another time, I had defended myself from rampaging loons hopped up on fizzy-brine and come to murder me in broad daylight (over some pitiable mis-understanding regarding who was betrothed to whom, as I recall, and who exactly could or couldn't claim the right of *prima nocte,* I claiming "me" and they claiming "not me"). That tussle of foils had left some shallow but looping furrows in the surface. And, of course, there was mine own first introduction to the manse, in which I had traipsed up the wide steps with hatchet in hand to demand audience with Uncle—I could still make out the faceted imprint that the jewelled hilt had smashed into the planed wood that long-ago winter's eve. Uncle's traitorous monkey-butler had opened the door then; but if he had not? I would have smashed it to smithereens with my ridiculous power. Such was my wroth! Such was my taste for traitorous monkey-flesh!

And yet! And yet if I had indeed smithereened the thing—this door would not be standing today. This pattern of grain and gash, of nail-hole and knot-hole, of tack-wound and imprint, would not present itself before me like a constellation across the wide heavens of my portico.

ARMAND THE PORCH-BOY.

I traced the fine lines with a finger-tip, leaving a faint trail of flour, feeling the texture of the grain beneath my skin. This discovery was more fascinating than any mealworm-hunt. To think that such patterns were anywhere we looked, just waiting for us to catch them in the right light and awaken to their latent majesty! I spun around, eager to take in my surroundings, to find whatever messages may be hidden in the design of everything around me.

Horse-falls reached my ears—a carriage approaching the gate. The gate-man turned the visitor away, as was his explicit charge; but for some reason, after some distant argument, the black iron creaked open. What treachery was this? What did I pay that dude for if not to keep out *freaking everybody?*

Even before the carriage's thin wheels had come to rest on the cobbles, the door was open and who should emerge but the magistrate himself, a certain Right Hon. Lord D_____, come straight from his bath, no doubt; his robe looked hastily donned, and his face bore the ruddiness of steam-soaking—that, or he was drunk this early in the day. He came to the ground heavily, without grace, and I saw the sheepish face of Armand within the carriage, refusing to meet my glance. How much time had passed? How deep had my pattern-reverie *been?*

As I saw the flash of colour in the magistrate's hand, I instantly knew why he had come. The Right Hon. drew himself up to his full, imposing height and thrust the origami in my face, its rude

contours waggling in the sunlight—"What," he boomed, "is the meaning of *this?"*

But now, having anticipated this line of inquiry, I had an answer. "Cryptic, yes," I ventured, plucking the paper from his gnarled claw; "do not fault me for that. It was my way of bringing you here," I gushed, my mind racing.

"Bringing me here?" Lord D_____ shook his head. "I came here to serve you with this summons in person, since you so callously—"

He stopped. For he saw what I saw. I had traced the constellation with my flour-tipped fingers, and drawn its outline for him to see. "Is...is that...?"

"It is," I breathed, and smiled. Armand gaped from the carriage. The driver, seated high and still clutching the reins, stifled a giggle. For upon the door was the perfect outline of a phallus.

"Dude, that's hilarious," Lord D_____ boomed, and we high-fived in a dignified manner. Then he leaned close, in a whisper that could be heard from across the garden: "I hate to bring bad news to a fellow phallus-sketch enthusiast, but there's been a bit of a shake-up at the Town Council. The Solicitor-General's made designs after you."

"That rangy sot," I snorted. "He's pawed this gate before, but he knows where my predlictions lie. For the *ladies."*

An uncomfortable pause. Then, Lord D_____ adjusted his robe and clambered his bulk back up the ladder to his carriage. "Well, then," he said. "I suppose I shall just *keep* your messenger-boy for the time being."

I sighed as I watched them rumble back down the path. Then I turned back to the house: "Draw the vinegar," I told anyone within ear-shot. "I'll be making the trip to town to-morrow."

14: A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

THE SOLICITOR-GENERAL'S PASTY-FACED file-boy lasted about six minutes before beginning to gag at the vinegary aroma that filled the antechamber. I watched his expression turn sour in increments from my perch across the room, on a hard wooden bench; I twirled my walking-stick idly while shooting side-long glances at the wispy lad.

My mind twirled in time with the staff, as I considered witty remarks to call across the room. For example, to be spoken in a hushed, conspiratorial tone: *I'm sorry to ask, but do you smell something? Is it, er...the Solicitor-General?* was high on the list when the door to the far office burst open and the thin, reedy frame of His Honour himself came wafting into the room. With a curt gesture he bade me follow, and I departed, leaving my witticism un-vocalised but mentally filing it away for later.

We clambered down the front steps to the street, His Honour holding two twiggy fingers to his nostrils. "I really don't know what that awful stench is in my office," he said. Once outside, he drew in a deep draught of the exteriour air—and promptly coughed. "Out here, too, blast it! Has someone upset a vinegar-cart? Doused vinegar about willy-nilly? I should levy charges, conduct a fair trial by jury of peers, convict, and toss the rascal in the lock-up!"

I dared not inform His Honour that the scent of the vine was, in fact, emanating from my person; instead I simply lingered in my own aromatic island, olfactorily oblivious to the heaps of refuse (living and otherwise) that littered the eye-scape in every direction. To stave off further (potentially embarrassing) inquiries regarding the odour, I diverted His Honour's attention back to the purpose for which he had summoned me from the Manor down into the municipality, requiring me to immerse myself in manually de-virginised

ENTERING THE POLICE BUREAU.

vinegar for the better part of yester-eve and this morning. "Pray tell," I entreated, "what manner of business is at hand, that concerns us both?"

"Ah, yes," he sniffed, stepping nimbly up to the kerb and making for a low, stone building. A squat constable looked up from knitting a vou-dou doll in the shape of Napoleon III long enough to pull the iron door open for us. We ducked into the low hall-way and were making our way down a brick-lined corridor before His Honour continued: "I wanted to introduce you to our new Head Inspector."

Head Inspector? I felt my blood turn to ice and my spleen turn to close the window against the chill. It took every ounce of resolve to refrain from faltering in my step, or worse yet, knocking His Honour in the skull with my walking-stick and making a run for it—but that was exactly the sort of behaviour that put me in fear of the law in the first place. No; I would restrain myself, and see how this played out. "I look forward to making his acquaintance," I said.

His Honour turned to me with a knowing grin on his long, craggy face. "We are a bit more progressive in this township, I'll have you know," he said mysteriously.

As I tried to make sense of his comment, he pushed through another metal door, and suddenly we were in a well-appointed office—the dingy grey and red of the corridor's block walls giving way to rich mahogany panelling and softly-crackling lanterns set into silver sconces in the forms of fantastical creatures: unicorns, centaurs, Scotsmen. I blinked in the warm light, and scarcely made out a figure sitting at the long desk, face buried behind a leather-bound tome. This person looked up as we entered, and then rose: it was a woman.

"Welcome, Your Honour," she said to the Solicitor-General. With a fine voice like the tinkling of garden-chimes disturbed by a nun's gas (smelling like roses and good for the environment), she welcomed me as well, and bade us sit. His Honour took to a leather arm-chair like it was his bath-tub, sinking deeply into its plush contours; I had somewhat more difficulty with my own seat, afraid of losing my balance and appearing the fool. (If only I hadn't dropped out of jester-college, I might have been able to make awkward motions appear graceful; but those guys had been wankers all and deserved the punishment I had meted out.) His Honour, all elbows and knees, apparently had no such anxiety.

Once I was settled, however, I turned my attention to the fine figure now standing before me—first, I well noted the high cheek-bones, as was proper for a lady of class; also, her hair was pinned up in a sensible fashion. So far, she matched my Ideal Mate check-list, tick for tick.

Additionally, she wore the uniform of the Head Inspector, which I thought was mighty forward of her; when the Head Inspector himself appeared (as I expected he would shortly) he would doubtless be upset to find her wearing his clothing, as it was a symbol of rank and authority, and as such would have to be *earned* by the wearer and not simply donned as if it were Darling Daddy's Career Day o'er at the nunnery.

"Good afternoon, Head Inspector," the Solicitor-General said, and I turned, expecting to find that man having entered the room—but to my amazement, it was to this woman that he had spoken. "You know my companion, of Wondermark Manor on Waverly Hill." At *companion,* I bristled.

"Only by reputation," the woman said, formally extending a hand to me. "Head Inspector Lara Q____, at your service."

Numbly, I took the hand. The touch of her skin was like an electric shock sent straight to my spinal cord. It took all of my motor-control not to collapse into a dribbling mess atop the bear-skin rug. "Charmed," I believe I squeaked. ("Not a pouf," I think I may have added, just for safety's sake.)

"Now then, Sir," she said, taking a serious tone, and I felt my heart leap into my throat. This delicate flower would be the death of me, in multiple ways at once. I could see it all un-spooling in my mind like a ball of twine bouncing down a hill towards a forest fire set by pillaging Vikings in historically-accurate non-horned hats: all the zoning violations, the liens against the property, the neighbours' complaints, the many, many murders that had taken place on the grounds since I had begun my tenancy. It was bad, all bad—and the worst of it all was that as she was prosecuting me for my many heinous crimes, she would likely never spare even a moment to lean over and kiss me. Our love was doomed before it had begun.

"Now then, Sir, I wish to make as my first order of business in this district a thorough accounting of the many outstanding reports we've filed regarding incidents at your property," she was saying. I could scarcely make out the words above the blood pounding in my ear-drums.

She consulted a thick ledger, stuffed to the bindings with yellowed papers of every shape, and began to talk from it: "Starting with this year alone: January the first, report of missing children in your area. January the third, six horses found mutilated on the grounds. January the fourth, burglary at neighbouring estate leads a trail back to your property. January the seventh, strange plume of smoke rises from your house, persists for the better part of a fort-

night, neighbours complain of the stench of burning snake-skin. January eleventh, a bear is loosed and hunted for sport in the street. It goes on and on like this." She snapped the folder shut, startling me from the pleasant trip down memory-lane. January had been tame compared to, say, March, but there had certainly been some classics. I found my gaze drifting to the bear-skin rug at my feet and mentally comparing it to the one, twice as large with a musket-ball hole punched through the eye-socket, that sat in my front sitting-room.

THE CHIEF MAGISTRATE.

"I wonder if you've considered any possible explanation for this remarkable string of aberrant behaviour centred at your estate," she said, taking pains (I noticed) to keep her voice flat and even, the better to judge my reaction.

I played her game right back at her, with equal control: "I have my theories," I said, "but what evidence have you gathered?"

She flipped open the folder and began to page through the reports again. I felt my face flush. The vinegar aroma seemed to have become particularly pungent in this enclosed space, but she hadn't so much as wrinkled her nose. "I think you can help us put an end to all of this, with your coöperation," she said.

This was it. This was the end. She would throw me behind bars and the whole mansion would go to rot, or worse. All those carefully-planned homicides (to say nothing of the rash, impetuous

ones) would come back to haunt me in court. This angelic creature would damn me to the foulest pits of Hades. I waited for the gates to come crashing down on my freedom.

"Tell me," she said, leaning closer—"have you ever given any thought to the idea that your estate may be haunted by a mischievous ghost?"

What.

I opened my eyes. "A g-g-g-ghost?"

"It fits the pattern," she said, looking back at her files. I looked incredulously at the Solicitor-General, who nodded his assent.

Head Inspector Lara began to spread tissue-thin pages delicately on her desk. "It's the only explanation that makes any sense. I would like to visit the estate with you—with your permission and coöperation, of course—and perhaps together we can crack this mystery and send any wayward spirits happily on their path towards the Great Beyond."

I grinned. "At my Lady's convenience," I said, and gave my walking-stick a twirl.

15: IN DIRE STRAITS.

I RUSHED HOME FROM THE HEAD INSPECTOR'S office with purpose. That lovely creature had inadvertently granted me a temporary reprieve from the charges of homicide that I richly deserved to face—but I now had two things to accomplish that would make that reprieve permanent: first, rid the estate of all outstanding evidence of said murders; second, create some sort of rigging, or lever-system, or perhaps hired saw-benders secreted away within the wall-boards creating spooky sound-effects—anything that would convince her that the crimes that took place on these grounds were, indeed, the work of a g-g-g-ghost.

The first order of business would be to sweep up the various corpses that littered the grounds. Impertinent servants, wayward

insurance salesmen, proselytising door-knockers that had gotten a bit too familiar—all of these would have to be somehow disposed of. I made to summon my body-disposal team, but when they did not respond to my snapping, nor to their dedicated bell, I realised that I was in fact staring at their remains, stuffed unceremoniously into the mouth of an ornate concrete bull-frog.

THE SOLICITOR-GENERAL.

The frog had been a gift from the Garden Society, on the occasion of my inaugural hosting of the Autumn Gala Luncheon and Harvest Jamboree, an event that had certainly *not* turned murderous. (I had been far too tossed on Lady W_____'s bitter brown dandelion-tonic.) The curious demise of the body-disposal team, however, was somewhat more of a mystery.

From the residue that caked their masses I was able to confirm that alcohol had played a part (notably as flame accelerant); from the varying integrity of the remains I pegged the event as having occurred within the last two months. Blimey, it could have been *anything* in that time; a body can't be expected to remember every single murderous incident that happens in a week, much less six—er, ten—er, *however*-many times that amount.

No matter; body-disposal engineers were tuppence-a-dozen in this modern economy. In fact, quite a crowd of them had taken to loitering about just outside the gates, watching my carriage traverse the drive and making themselves available for day-labour. Should my horses or orphans take the turn too slowly whilst merging with the thorough-fare, they would saunter casually up to the hansom,

holding up fingers to signify their wage; I once made the mistake of not glancing out the window while flicking a boogie and ended up (quite accidentally) hiring three of them through lunchtime. I didn't have much work to assign them, but they gave the kitchen-staff the opportunity to use the guest china. (The guest china *himself* was not amused—I gathered from the way that his conical hat kept falling off during.)

That particular day, my temper had turned foul (a rare occurrence, I should say) and I'd had to venture to the gates and hire three more body-disposers to rid me of the first three. What they do with the bodies, I have no idea; although I would admit to curiosity, my new stay-out-of-irons policy holds me strictly to plausible deniability. I nursed my fourth vodka-and-beetle-juice of the hour, already well on my way to demolishing every last vestige of bothersome knowledge that cluttered my cranium.

But choking the life from my synapses did not accomplish the task at hand: preparing the estate for the forthcoming visit by the Head Inspector and her poltergeist squad. Once I'd (eagerly, natch) invited her to visit the Manor, she'd mentioned off-handedly that she would be bringing along her specially-trained ghost-detecting goons, a prospect at which I had audibly groaned—the guest china was exhausted enough as it was, the poor fellow. Also, it would mean that my faux-fantômes would have to be that much more convincing.

"If only I knew some real ghosts that could give me some tips on what exactly I should do," I mused aloud, staring at nothing in particular.

Nothing in particular moved a good three feet with a sliding crunch, and my vodka-and-beetle-juice slipped from my fingers to shatter on the floor.

"*You're in luck,*" came a deep, echoing voice, and I wet myself. ⌖

THE TAKING TREE.

16: A GHOSTLY PRESENCE.

HORRORS! THE GHOSTLY VOICE HAD caused a *bona fide* trouser-accident. I patted at my pantaloons—sure enough, my fingers came away damp. I took the steps two at a ginger time back to my bed-chamber, holding fiercely in my gut to whatever power of autonomy I still retained. Once safely to the water-closet, I took a breath and let Nature's call continue in force, while thinking back on the last thirty seconds.

The incorporeal speech had seemed to come from everywhere at once, filling the room and reverberating from every fixture. What could it mean? And why had this mystery been fousted upon me at this very minute, with the Head Inspector mere moments from my doorstep?

As I attempted to thread my feet through the sopping trouser-legs, I reflected that it had been a solid year since the last time Nature, that haggard witch, had poked me in the bladder with her knobby cane and dashed my pride to pieces—on that day, like today, I had been anxiously awaiting the arrival of a fetching young lass. I had been in the antechamber, pacing a bit and rehearsing my smooth lines for the evening, when a sharp rap had sounded at the door—it was the Lady P_____'s footman, come to herald her arrival. At that moment, as I stepped forward to welcome the Lady to the estate, *at that very moment* Nature had leapt up and struck me full in the kidneys with her cruel, unheeding mockery, and I still hated her for it.

As I recall, I'd gurgled something more than a squawk but less than a word, yet still tried to play it off, hoping the Lady wouldn't notice. After all, I told myself, what well-bred Lady would even recognise the tell-tale spreading stain of self-soilage; if she knew what

she was seeing, the thinking went, she was hardly a Lady proper enough for me.

Needless to say, within minutes the Lady P_____ had left me with my own P, and I sat alone in the North Atrium cursing Nature, cursing her vile, cackling pettiness and her immature sense of humour. The servants had found me there, squatting in my trousers, my sobs mingling sadly with the intermittent *drip-drip-drip* onto the cold marble floor. Anyway, this recollection was getting really gross, so I changed into clean pants and headed back for the stair-case.

My reverie of drippy moments past and present had all but distracted me from the ghostly voice I'd heard just prior to the, ah, *moisture incident,* but that was remedied the instant I set foot onto the first step—like a church-bell, the sound rang from the stone walls. "*Here I am,*" it boomed, and I stumbled and clutched the railing and felt my heart leap to my throat and beat thrummingly within my larynx.

"Who's there," I cried, whirling around; but the voice cut me off, seeming to descend from the rafters above my head one instant, then rise from the floor-boards far below.

"*The better question,*" it said, wrapping its presence around me like a cloud of hot breath, "*is who are you, and what are you doing in my house?*"

I tightened my abdomen, determined to keep these pants as dry as a teetotaler's tankard in Tipperary on Tuesday. Totally. "Show yourself," I said, feeling the booming laughter of the spectre's response even in the quaking railing beneath my slick palm.

The laughter stopped abruptly, bringing silence once more. I caught my breath, startled by the sudden void. I turned, slowly, in every direction; nothing. The sounds of the room gradually became audible again: foremost, the wind, whistling through the still-gaping hole in the sky-light, that un-scabbed wound from the old man and his bizarre flying-craft. The hole had been hastily patched with some carpet-tacks and an old coat, as we'd had neither the time, nor the opportunity, nor the manpower, nor the inclination, nor the

means, nor the know-how to repair it properly. (In fact, should the evening turn chilly I would probably rescue the coat from that duty and don it myself.)

And then: the far-off sound of creaking metal. The front gates! The Head Inspector, in her carriage, with her ghost-hunting goons. And here I had been so busy soiling my trousers and conversing with spectres that I had set up no levers or pulleys or saw-blades or crying statues or catsup-stigmata or comical slimy side-kicks or bad CGI effects to convince her that a murderous ghoul in fact inhabited the premises. With no ghost to blame my homicides on, I would be found out and my deeds discovered. I was ruined; I might as well start converting my cash into pesos now, for the long flight ahead.

Unless...

"Are you there?" I shouted into the emptiness.

Only echoes in reply. By the sound, the horses outside had cleared the cobblestones and were moving onto gravel. They would be at the door in moments.

"What do you want?" I called. "There must be *something* you need."

A low sigh, from everywhere—or just a breeze?

No. The lamps in their sconces had not so much as flickered. It was the g-g-g-ghost.

"Let us become partners, for this afternoon at least," I cried, seeing the shadows move through the drawn curtains of the front windows. "Please. You first spoke to me for a reason. You had some intent—let us execute it."

And then I had the most peculiar sensation—though I saw nothing, though my eyes lit upon only the empty air, somehow I knew that the voice was smiling.

"*She's here,*" it breathed, and downstairs, at that exact second, came the knocking.

17: THE ARRIVALS.

THAT DREADFUL POUNDING! WAS IT my heart within my ribs, or the visitors at the door? I could scarcely distinguish one from another. My hand fluttered to my breast—nerves making my limbs and innards into rubber and butterflies. The rubber sank to the floor and rebounded softly, having smeared my courage across the surface at my feet; with each weakening bounce it deposited more of my resolve at ground level. All this as the flighty creatures of my attention darted to and fro, nervously sucking nectar from every possible distraction in the foyer—the wall-sconces (their patina! How in need of polish); the brass doorknob (was that a scratch in its lustre?); the gaping statue of Heracles that yawned above me with arrogant disdain, his powdery skin still be-sooted from the bizarre conflagration not one month ago. As hummingbirds flitted about like fire ants and rubber un-spooled about the floor like molasses, I pushed myself through the deafening rumble of metaphors and focused instead on the steady knocking, growing more insistent by the second.

By now my servants had begun to appear, poking their heads from their quarters or crannies or with eyes pressed to cracks in the floor-boards, remembering my past fury when knocking doors had historically been left un-addressed. I could sense them thinking through the process in their simple minds: should we venture forth, and take this responsibility upon ourselves? Or stay put, and leave the master to his own devices? Each option was equally likely to incur wrath, and in fact it was this perpetual imperilment that had, indirectly, led the Head Inspector here today. My temper, in past, had been easily kindled and rarely sated, and such situations had often gleefully led to blood-shed.

Today, however, I would have to be on my best behaviour. With a glare they knew well, I sent the servants scurrying back to their

respective nooks, before dispatching one last glance about the room in whole and tugging on my fancy-gloves, all the better to be proper.

"Are we in accord?" I asked the air, not knowing if the mysterious voice could hear me. In response, my collar stiffened with a not-entirely-tangible breeze.

"*Leave this to me,*" the whisper came; and I reached for the doorknob. In the moment of bright sunlight that followed I had the startling thought that I must have been imagining that terrible voice; but it was too late now: the door swung wide.

Two beefy types handling a log-shaped object were conferring with the Head Inspector near her carriage. These would be the ghost-hunters. I smoothed my hair with a glove and attempted a smile as all turned to regard me.

"Oh! We feared you weren't in," Lara purred, gliding across the gravel with a grace I would have thought impossible for anyone with joints. To the pair of brutes she directed: "We shan't need the battering-ram after all."

With some obvious reluctance they shrugged; I fingered my already-abused door with alarm. "You would have availed yourself of your inspection without me?"

"Now, now," she said, delicately lifting her hem and stepping across the threshold; "we are here on official police business." She softened this last statement with a beaming expression; I felt my innards melt and begin to leak from my belly-button in the most romantic way possible, but could scarcely take my eyes from her feet—for I had glimpsed a flash of pink skin. An ankle! I sucked in my breath.

"My eyes are up here," she added softly, and I jerked my chin away, tripping over a stray apology someone had left in the entryway. I looked back to the two gorillas, now encumbered with an armful each of technical-looking equipment: polished wood and brass adorned with all manners of gauges and widgets and peep-valves all capped by a large copper stop-cock.

AN ABSINTHE PARTY BEFORE IT GETS FREAKY.

The Head Inspector followed my gaze. "Our equipment, on loan from the Institute for the day," she said, as if I would know what she was talking about (of course, I feigned that I did). I hadn't the faintest idea what Institute she might be referring to. The Naval Institute? That didn't make any sense, as the devices were far too large to fit in anyone's navel; and the only other Institute I knew of was the Institute for the Cultivation of the Blind as Weavers, and *that* was an organization I had founded myself, as part of an elaborate prank that had my poor blind cousin Maynard enduring an hilarious battery of absurd applications and, later, the most brutal hazing that a ribald Ceylon steamer-crew could devise. Ah, the memories! I could still feel the slap of his sightless gaze on the back of my head on summer evenings, when I caught a whiff of curry on the breeze.

My fond recollections twisted in my gut, however, as I noticed the Head Inspector tracing a line of soot down the marble thigh of Heracles, blacking one perfect fingertip. This place was practically oozing with incriminating evidence, were one disposed to look for it; no doubt the basement would make for particularly awkward conversation. Of late I'd had to simply shove things down the steps—

old food, bodies, servants half-awake, orphans with limbs already harvested for other purposes—and I wasn't sure just *what* exactly still remained down there. I hadn't so much as taken one step actually into the wretched place in months; I'd simply been pulling open the door, heaving (or kicking) as necessary, and letting the heavy trap slam shut before I heard anything hit the ground. For all I knew, there was a whole rebellious colony of zombie freedom fighters down there, scheming and making tea from ham-leavings and rain-drops; though there couldn't be *that* many of them, as I'd had the place fumigated last Christmas.

But even here, many yards away from that dreadful basement door, here, not five feet from the welcome mat with the embroidered puppy-dog, here, thirty seconds into her inspection, Lara had already found cause for pause. I found it suddenly hard to swallow.

"What sort of fire was this, lit in the foyer?" she said. Her eyes were the most piercing blue of Law. When I opened my mouth to lie my tongue was dry as a medicine ball in my mouth.

I gagged for a few moments, fumbling for an explanation. In truth, all the fires of late had run together in my memory. Was this the book-burning? No, the barbecue? Or was it the signal-fire I had set for the zeppelin races? Possibly our latest religious immolation?

"Ah, that was, er..." I whirled, hoping to find something to jog my memory, something to inspire a particularly believable tale, something to make those gauges jump in the goons' hands—

And then they did. The needles jumped on the meters. The walls shook with an unearthly wind. Four sets of eyes widened at once—and every lamp snuffed out in that instant. The room plunged into darkness.

In the blackness, I grinned. My g-g-g-ghost had delivered.

18: VIOLENCE.

VOICES RANG OUT IN THE SUDDEN DARK—"Lanterns!" and, imaginatively, "What foul devilry is this?" from the two hulks of the spook-squad, insisting (in their irritating, imperious way) on explanations for every erratic detail of existence. I felt confident presuming that even in the safety of their respective homes (not daring to imagine that they might share an abode; no, that would be too deliciously scandalous a proposition to entertain at a time of such stressful agitation—better to retain that thought for a more savoury moment alone) they dashed their minds against the sundry and storied mysteries of telegraphs, or pressed professors for digestible descriptions of the behaviour of radio-waves, or provoked longhand equations to explain how the Internet might still exist even in those dark hours at mid-night when its coal-turbines fall silent. Yes, these boys wanted *answers,* and secretly, I delighted in their momentary ignorance.

Head Inspector Lara had no doubt retained their service in the interest of adding an empirical component to her own, perhaps more *intuitive* investigative style...thus, plainly, the task before me was to appeal to her predilection for the fantastic, for the sensual. It was a mission I took upon myself gladly. As the buffoons continued to call out for lights, bumping into each other and crashing about the room, I gently tapped through the air in front of me, hoping to encounter a soft dash of silk that would indicate close contact with the Head Inspector.

And then—the noise! A terrible shuddering drowned out all other sound. The walls creaked and the roof threatened to thunder down onto our heads. I ducked to one knee, covering my head against the inevitable collapse—and found the Head Inspector, already on the floor, struggling to regain her footing. I opened my

mouth to speak, but the banging and clattering around us drowned all attempts at communication and shrieking both.

Suddenly, with a fearsome flash of light and a searing crackle that anyone could recognise as charring human flesh, every lamp in the room sprang to brilliant life. A terrible voice seemed to pour from the lips of the flame itself: *"Who dares enter my cavern of souls?"*

The sound echoed and rang from every surface. We cringed at

THE LIGHT-HOUSE OF DESPAIR—[SEE PAGE 326.]

the light; we shielded our ears against the assault. I wondered—far too late!—if cahooting with this ghoul (or whatever it truly was) was really as sensible a prospect as it had seemed ten minutes ago, when we had made our pact to deceive the Head Inspector.

I thought back to minor incidents that had, over time, not particularly stuck in my memory—various doors found open or closed; jam-jars, un-lidded, left in corridors; horses somehow introduced into the privy; a link of sausages somehow wended about the crystal chandelier at heights unreachable by any ladder on the premises. I had always attributed these bizarre (if rather benign) occurrences to sleepy servants, or unsociable house-guests, or burglars with a poorly-developed sense of prankery. There had always been enough bodies in the building to ascribe an inexplicable act to someone with more idle time than social grace.

But now...if indeed the sonorous spectre had been a long-time occupant of these halls...

Was *I,* in fact, trespassing on *his* domain?

The thought gave me a chill. I realised that nobody had responded to his booming inquiry—perhaps the task fell to me. In the waxing lamp-light I watched the oaf-twins gape at the flickering meters and tingling antennae of their detecto-matron, or whatever it was. Clearly, even according to their spook-ometer, the presence was real—and clearly, I would have to deal with it. The Head Inspector's eyes, wide in the night, took in my every move. I made sure of it.

"Treacherous fiend!" I cried. The entity was either playing along with my ruse to frighten and intimidate the Head Inspector (as it had earlier indicated it would), or it was diabolical in nature; either way I would play it as my adversary, at least for the moment. "Begone from these premises—your foul presence is not welcome here!"

I thought it quite a rousing call to action, myself. However, if in fact the fiend was play-acting against me, he seemed to be taking it a stroke too far—for in the next instant the giant statue of Heracles came to life, and dashed the Head Inspector against the wall.

19: GRAVE INJURY.

THE NORTH ATRIUM REVERBERATED WITH the terrific crash. Stone-dust and wood-splinters filled the air—as I ducked and protected my precious face I caught a flashing glimpse of the Head Inspector's badge, loosed from its clasp, spinning in a wild arc through the murk.

The blazing fire-light of now-toppled lanterns flickered and spat across the statue's gleaming marble skin, outlining fierce muscles that twisted and bulged in the smooth whiteness like armadillos wrestling in a pillow-case. Until ten seconds ago, this figure of

SMASHING SKULLS INTO DUST—[SEE PAGE 594.]

Heracles had been but a massive carving; now, it was destroying my home. What had I *done,* thought I, by agreeing in desperation to the vague terms the spectral voice had proposed?

"Stop this madness!" I cried. "Stop it! The deal is off! It's over!"

But no response came—my voice was swallowed by the crashing and collapsing of the entire sitting-room hearth. Soot-blacked stone crumbled like sand-châteaux before the massive creature; he clutched the Head Inspector in one sharp white hand like a blackjack or bobby-buster. She was limp; I knew not whether she still drew breath.

I suddenly began to feel flushed and tingly—what *was* this uncomfortable sensation? With a shock I came to realise that I was, against all odds, experiencing genuine concern for another human life. And this time, there was no time to drink the sentiment away.

The Head Inspector's two companions, the hulking brutes with the ghoul-ometers and spook-amatrons calibrated to register and amplify even the faintest æthereal stirrings, now stared dumbly at gauges pegged to their stops and popped free from their housings by the over-blast of signal; their fancy needles and brass valves

had sprung and split from the pressure of straight-up g-g-g-ghost action. They scrabbled to keep their feet as a rushing wind blew from above—I looked up to see gaping hole in the sky-light, where a single carpet-tack still held fast the overcoat now fluttering and snapping like a pennant in a typhoon. With my eyes I traced the stair-case winding to near that gale-force flag; it was also very near the head of Heracles, who even now pounded his fists against the creaking railings.

A moment later I found myself flying up those steps, taking them three at a bound with a haste not usually in evidence when simply retiring to the boudoir. With a tremendous leap I planted one foot on the swaying bannister and reached for the coat with out-stretched fingers. For a single, awful second I felt the ground drop entirely away, as I floated between the blasting wind of heaven and the wretched Earth below, suspended by the dueling forces of gravity and jumping-ness.

And then I felt fabric 'twixt my fingers—I had the coat. I jerked it against the power of the carpet-tack, pulling the whole mess down to cover the head of the statue. I didn't really think that covering Heracles' stone eyes would prevent the monster from seeing—but then I hadn't really though it would've come to life, either.

It worked. The statue stopped, dropped Lara, and bellowed in rage. I tumbled heavily to the stair-case and scrambled to descend those swaying steps before the creature destroyed the structure. I met the brutes at the crumpled form of the Head Inspector.

She lay in a mangled heap; breathing or no, I could nary tell. Even in terrible injury she was beautiful; her head lolled back and forth on a limp, lovely neck. I took her by the shoulders and shook her viciously, trying to wake her; but the brutes took her hands and feet and yanked her from my grasp.

The two rushed her out the door to the carriage and made to set off at once. The cobblestone path no doubt assuaged her spinal injuries with its bouncy massage.

The front door slammed. And so the commotion stopped, as if a match had been snuffed. The lamps burnt merrily. A gentle breeze

tousled the destroyed remnants of my stair-case and sitting-room. The walls sagged with bashed and shattered wounds. A tattered, fluttering scarf and a distinct Lara-shaped imprint in the sitting-room wall—accurate in shocking detail down to wide-eyed alarm—were the only evidence she'd been here at all.

"I have ridded you of those meddlers, as promised," Heracles boomed good-naturedly as if nothing at all untoward had occurred, his voice the strange grating sound of mill-stones rubbed against cliff-sides. My heart boiled with anger—but what could I say against a beast that could crush me as soon as blink a stony eye!

The statue settled with a heavy shuffle into a cross-legged position, wiping out a hearth as he did so. Those milky eyes fixed on me, somehow impossibly seeing, their veined blankness sending a chill to my very core—a chill that would only crystallise as the statue moved its very lips and said, quite calmly:

"Now, you are in my debt."

20: A SHOCKING REVELATION.

THE SOUND OF FAR-OFF CHURCH-BELLS drifted into the ruined foyer. The front door creaked on its hinges with each faint breath of wind, letting in the evening air. The ground at my feet was covered with rubble—splinters of wood; marble dust; chunks of brick. Lanterns jutted crookedly from sconces like the haggard teeth of a whale-man, burning dimly like the haggard teeth of a whale-man, smelling on the whole somewhat better than a whale-man, but then no burning substance in Christendom wouldn't. The servants were gone, or at least nowhere to be heard; probably they were taking advantage of the distraction to vulgarly thrash about in their quarters, the better to replenish their ilk.

As for me, I sat alone, next to the giant statue of Heracles, surveying the destruction of my home.

"She'll be back," I said, of the Head Inspector. "She'll bring the whole Bureau with her. They'll call in Ghosty McGhosterton from the Municipal Ghostery in Ghostershire-upon-Spook, and you don't want *that* guy on your case; it's ghost-puns all day long with that crowd. You have made this worse than it ever would have been. I didn't want any of this. I didn't ask you to hurt her."

"I was not the one who cried to the æther for salvation," came a soft, clear voice.

I looked up. This was not the granite rumbling of the statue's stone throat, nor the booming thunder of the g-g-g-ghost that had visited me on the stair-case, back when the stair-case still stood. This was the voice of a man, approaching from the wreck of a doorway, wearing a rakish cap and the most awful breeches. He had the snooty air of a man out of time; like a spirit that had decided to take the form of a man, but having as its only reference lurid descriptions from second-rate dandy-rags.

He glowed, subtly, like a foppish algae. He did not look real.

Sensing my un-asked question, he looked down at himself. "I have taken this form to make things easier on you," he said. "When I was alive, I remember how horrendously ignorant I was of the æthereal realm, how frightened I was at the simplest noise or startle-bug or incubus encounter. Humans have such capacity for stupidity." He took a moment to tug delicately on the fingers of a white glove that seemed to shimmer in the lamp-light. "Man can be such a dumb animal, jumping at shadows and believing the most preposterous lies, anything that will make their narrow little world-view make sense. Why, I remember when I thought that fire was hot!" At this he passed a finger through the flame of a lamp, with nary a change of expression, looking over at me as if he expected me to leap to my feet in astonishment. "Eh? Eh? Really, you primitive mortal folk are so bothersomely dense. Why, I remember the time when I believed that the only way to digest food was to—"

"Enough," I said, forcing my aching body to its feet. "So you are elevated beyond the pale frailty of Man. What message have you brought from the hereafter?"

"Message?" At this he laughed, an annoying trill, the breath of which extinguished the lamp and plunged his face into shadow. "My dear boy, if I am here for any concrete reason at all—and I'm certainly not saying that I am—it's not to bring a *message*. How preposterous! How absurd! How absolutely like a man, to force some meaning onto every whim of chaos."

"Then why are you *here,"* I grumbled, feeling rather the worse for the conversation. I was beginning to prefer the booming wind of mystery to this dandy's twinkling lilt.

He turned to face me, his eyes alight with purpose. Each word brought him another suddenly-terrifying step closer. "You have a book that belongs to me," he said. "I have searched through every unlocked room in this manor, and I have not found it."

"I don't think there are any books left here, and good riddance," I rejoindered. The still-smouldering soot-pile in the Great Hall's stove was testament to that. Oh, what warmth those innumerable volumes had provided! What a noble sacrifice they had made! I had been dreadfully close to actually shivering that night.

"I left it with your uncle, many, many years ago," he continued, as if he hadn't heard me, which was impossible, because I am loud. "It was a tall volume of necro-mancy that holds many secrets. He was the one living man I could trust." A far-off look drifted across his shimmering eyes. "I met him just the once, in Dublin—he'd had a bit too much to drink and made a pass at me. We'd spent some time in the darkness until he fell asleep at my ankles. You look like him, you know."

I thought of the cottony corpse upstairs in the East Wing, locked behind a coppery doorknob in a room that had been stripped of its many artifacts and treasures during the three-day paper-purge in the Great Hall. I pictured that stiff, dried hatchet-wound, and then I thought of this fop's ankles, and then I tried to make up

gibberish-words to clear my mind of the image. Apparently I said them aloud, because I heard them echo, and it earned me a strange look from the dandy.

"There are no books remaining in this estate, none what-so-ever," I finally said. "It's a point of moral principle. I won't have them beneath my roof."

The man looked upwards, at the gaping hole in the sky-light through which the dusk was turning to night. "Right here would do fine, then," he said simply.

"We burnt them," I said. "We burnt them all. We burnt them gladly—the books, then the wall-paper, then the kitchen-help. I'm not sorry. I'm not sorry about them at all. We all do what we do in this life for reasons that we think are best, at the time."

His eyes narrowed. "That short-sighted philosopy is what dug you the hole you're in now," he said. "Are you *proud* of your pathological behaviour? When you pass to my plane you will have much to look back at with sorrow. Go on, brag—your debauchery does not impress me."

"Would that your lifeless husk was locked upstairs with the old man," I shot back. "And a pox on your detachment. I brand my servants because it's *fun*. I give free reign to my murderous impulses because it *makes me feel alive*. I swim naked in a vat of whale-blubber because *I heard it was good for my skin*. What was *in* your precious book? Words, like all the rest? If we'd known it was yours, we'd have burnt it first of all."

The man shook his head. "If you cannot give me the book, I will take my debt from you in other ways," he said. I felt a brief flash of panic, but he reassured me: "I have passed beyond the realm of carnal desires. My sole concern now is honour."

"Honour?" I spat the words. "You promised to help me! I wanted to *deceive* the Head Inspector, not *mangle* her! I wanted to *woo* her, not slam her against a wall and destroy my house—"

"Your *uncle's* house," he interrupted.

I kicked a chunk of marble and hit him in the thigh. "Ow," he added.

I stopped short.

"I thought you were a g-g-g-ghost," I said.

He looked at me, then looked down at his thigh, at the dusty smudge.

Then he looked slowly over at the front door, where stood the hulking figure of one of the Head Inspector's goons. From his expression, he'd clearly been listening for some time.

"Came back for her scarf," the man said slowly, pointing to the tattered silk that lay near my feet.

I stared at the man, and at the imposing figure of the Solicitor-General behind him, and at what appeared to be several thick-and-ready constables behind him.

Suddenly the giant statue of Heracles shifted behind me. I whirled—and for the first time saw the elaborate ropes-and-pulleys apparatus that controlled its movements.

It had been a set-up.

I turned to the dandy. Before I could say a word, he'd reached into the statue's throat and reset what sounded like a phonograph needle. *"I have ridded you of those meddlers, as promised,"* came the statue's 'voice,' suddenly less frightening than it had been an hour ago.

He moved the needle again. I heard a scratching sound as the needle jumped about—then the brassy tones of Herb Alpert ("blanks are expensive," the fop said apologetically), and finally, my *own* voice, waxy and thick but unmistakable: "I give free reign to my murderous impulses because it *makes me feel alive."*

The 'ghost' extended a hand. "Special Investigator Peapoddy, at your service."

I stared at his hand, as real and solid as my own. Its faint phosphorescent glow, I now detected, was a powdering of Aboriginal algae-dust. The stuff was a penny-a-pinch down at the crab-shacks. Hardly supernatural in the least!

"Charmed," I managed, feeling my bladder give way to Nature once again.

21: A DESPERATE ACT.

THERE WASN'T MUCH TO EXPEL, THIS TIME; my bladder was still empty from the episode earlier. But it *tried,* that valiant organ, gifting its meagre contents to the wide world outside, for what good it would do. The net result: mildly damp trousers.

A mildly uncomfortable sensation by itself, without mentioning the stony silence from the cadre of law-enforcement assembled at my doorstep: Special Investigator Peapoddy, a dandy freak; one of the hulking ghost-hunters from the Head Inspector's newly-formed Ectology Division (as I later learnt it was called); a handful of tallow-liver'd constables; and the angular frame of the Solicitor-General himself, wearing a most sour expression.

"It was all a ridiculous farce," Peapoddy declared smugly. "And with your confession inscribed on the wax phonograph installed in Heracles, here"—with this he patted the statue, which was looking more like plaster and less like marble with each passing second—"your reign of violence over Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats has ended. The Head Inspector—"

"The Head Inspector!" I cried. "You've dashed her through my sitting-room wall! She's dead, by now, isn't she, you maniac!" I turned to the Ectologist. "You there—you chaps spirited her away after this madman as much as crushed her with his hands. How does she fare? Does she still breathe?"

Peapoddy spoke up before the brute could reply. "Any violence she has experienced; any excruciating pain she has felt, or is now feeling, is a direct result of your complicity," he said. I lunged at the man, but the constables rushed forward to restrain me—I managed no more than twenty or thirty hard blows about his head and neck before they pulled me away. How I yearned to sink a croquet-mallet into his spine! Should the Head Inspector ultimately perish

PEAPODDY.

from his assault—I pledged I would find *some* way to mallet the man, and *drat* the consequences.

He cowered in the corner, hands up to protect his precious face or whatever. I roughly shrugged the constables' hands from my person, and turned my attention to the statue of Heracles, looking closely for the first time at the dark pulleys and ropes that had given the statue its ambulatory character. Upon inspection it was clear that this jerking puppet was but a crude imitation of my glorious original. Instead of being carved from a single block of marble, this version had been assembled from a kit (the hastily duct-taped joins were painfully obvious even in the dimness); instead of heroic features withstanding all adversity, this one appeared to be wilting beneath a disagreeably humid afternoon. Most crucially, instead of depicting the demigod in the heroic act of slaying his music tutor with a lyre, this knock-off seemed to be in the midst of ordering replacement eyeglasses.

"Really, you must have been so shocked to see your statue come alive!" Peapoddy cackled. "Our plan was amazingly ingenious in every fashion. To think, you didn't even *notice* that we had spirited an alternate statue into your foyer, just *waiting* for the chance to lurch forth at any moment! And your servants have been *most* helpful in every facet of this investigation."

I jerked my gaze up to the fop. "Never," I breathed. "My servants remain loyal to me till death! They've even been branded with hot iron to seal the deal, my laughter drowning out their incessant squeals of pain. How could they feel anything *but* loyalty?"

"They positively *welcomed* us in," Peapoddy grinned, seizing this opportunity to broaden the betrayal already clefting me in twain. The twain-conductor continued: "Armand the porch-boy gladly provided the magistrate with his front door-key, and I hear they are to be married soon, *mazel-tov.* Leonid the alarm-boy ensured that you'd sleep through the entire operation—"

AN ECTOLOGIST.

"Leonid?" I scowled. "Was *that* that whelp's name? That's sort of a stupid name."

"They have all turned against you," Peapoddy said, sharpening each word into a roof-tack and driving it deeply into the shingles of my soul with the hammer of his whiny tone.

"I thought they loved me," I rejoindered, lamely. "I had always worked under that assumption."

"Oh, woe is you! Two trousers soiled in as many hours. Taking up residence in your walls and speaking to you through an elaborate series of echoic tubes was really the most fun I've had on a Special Investigation since impersonating a mermaid to bust old Cap'n Narwhal for bilge-smuggling." Peapoddy leaned close, sensing my impotence, and also my inability to do anything. "Did you really think you could just *kill* the assessor? Pay off the magistrate with naughty origami and Armand? *Seduce* the *Head Inspector?*"

"My love for her remains pure," I huffed. Granted, such love was based strictly on the limited professional interactions we had so far enjoyed—but those had been pretty good, for the most part,

except for the one thing. "Did *you* really think you could harm her so, and face no consequences? I will see to it that your gizzard-eggs are—"

Peapoddy waved my words away from his face. "Poppycock," he burbled. "Once you provide me with the Tome of the Cowering Sigil, the spells and directions within will instantly restore her to top form, all the better to prosecute you. Now"—he leaned close, and I felt his decidedly un-ghostly onion-breath batter my pores—*"where is that book."*

I held my tongue, but it started to get dry so I let go. I *knew* the book to be burnt; we hadn't left a scrap of paper un-lit during our Great Hall purge. But clearly *he* hadn't bought that explanation; he believed me to have secreted the volume away somewhere. Was this a chip I could use to bargain with? To buy time, if not necessarily freedom, and biscuits, if not necessarily time?

I realised that Peapoddy, for all his lacy cuffs and bravado, and despite apparently having lived cramped within my walls for some time, fundamentally misunderstood my character. He believed me possessed of at least *some* cunning, a sensible sort who wouldn't *dare* burn an obviously old and treasured book. In this he appeared to be ascribing to me some whit of reason.

In this, of course, he was totally mistaken.

This, added to the new information that the spells in the book would evidently bring the Head Inspector back to full health, gave me my plan.

I took a deep breath, before Peapoddy, the constables, the Ectologist, and the Solicitor-General. All men that would gleefully lock me away forever, given the slightest provocation.

Before this whole crowd, I told a blatant lie. "Fine," I said. "I'll take you to the book."

22: UNWELCOME VISITORS.

I THREADED THROUGH THE RUBBLE-STREWN North Atrium, leading the caravan of constables towards the East Wing. We stopped for some crisps in the kitchen; then I led them 'round the chocolate-fountain, up a set of narrow stairs, and towards that far point where my late uncle's library capped the architecture like a jaunty wig. The troupe following me didn't know that the shelves in said library were, in fact, bare as last Arbour Day's chicken-bones.

The silence was what struck me most: the servants were gone. No incessant chatter murmured behind locked doors; no ridiculous hopscotch-playing or vou-dou chanting or pleas-for-mercy reached my ears. I had long and ineffectually admonished the staff to maintain a respectful noise-lessness, but now that I was granted my wish, I longed for the barest peep from around a corner—just so I could launch into a fury. Anything to sip from that gilded chalice of power! My sense of authority within these walls was at a low ebb, and it made me *sad*.

Special Inspector Peapoddy came up beside me, his flouncy trousers incongruous in this hall-way of dark woods, sober colours, and "no flouncing" signs. I made myself throttle my hatred for the man, play it cool, not let my roiling abhorrence for him spill over into violence. Self-restraint was a new discipline for me—this whole experience, if nothing else, had been an education.

"There are many books in Uncle's library," I lied. Had I spoken in the past tense, the statement would have been true. "Pray tell, what distinguishes *this* book from any other? How am I to tell it apart?"

"You said you would take us to it," Peapoddy hissed, "but you don't know how to find it?"

Urp. "It is certainly with the other books of Uncle's," I added hastily. This was technically true—*all* the books were ash in the Great Hall's stove. "But he brought many volumes back from his travels. What characteristic will allow me to pluck the Tome of the Cowering Sigil immediately from the stacks?"

"I'll know it when I see it," Peapoddy said, and that seemed the end of it. But a few steps later, he seemed to relent: "The Tome is one of only two books written by Plaxus the Unwise, that great and learned scholar of antiquity. You've heard of him, certainly?"

Never in my life, but I nodded sagely. Peapoddy continued: "Plaxus lived at the time of Rubidarch the Orange and Mouseketeer the Loud, the famed alchemists and water-heater repair-men. He worked closely with them as they progressively unlocked the æthereal mysteries of the human body. It was quite genius, really—through a systematic series of vivisections, Rubidarch and Mouseketeer examined and measured and recorded every system and process of human life, assigning a set of numerical values to each quality. Then medicine became a simple process of mathematics—measuring the characteristics of, say, a diseased organ, and then working the abacus, seeing what must be done to make the equations balance again. It was remarkable research."

Vivisections, eh? "I've embarked on similar experiments myself, but not of that scale," I mused.

Peapoddy shot me a dark look. "Rubidarch and Mouseketeer were roundly condemned as heretics by the emergent Church, naturally."

"Naturally."

"They were burnt at the same stake that they had everything at, along with their research notes and figures, their knowledge largely lost to the ages. Imagine how we could build on their work today, with our current understanding of anærobic geometry, of the once-thought-magickal properties of calculus lard, of multi-variable long-division and other, even *more* ridiculous higher mathematics!" Peapoddy seemed to be angry at the air in front of him, barking at it as if it would choke him. "Plaxus the Unwise managed to escape

EATING HATS FOR PLEASURE—[SEE PAGE 537.]

the Church's death-otters and spent the rest of his life planning to transcribe what he remembered of Rubidarch and Mouseketeer's findings. But he waited until he was old, and once he finally started he only got through two books before he died. Ironically, scholars believe that he died of the very ailment he was describing as his pen faltered and fell from the page."

"What was that?" I asked. I wasn't sure how much ignorance of the subject I should admit—but Peapoddy seemed happy to blather on.

But he shrugged. "I don't know—that's in the Tome of the Precious Lore, the second of the two, and the one I haven't read. While the two are largely similar, they do differ in certain respects. Notoriously, the Precious Lore has a particularly hilarious cover-illustration. If only the Church would have allowed any copy to be made without sending the full force of the Vatican's Holy Avengers to destroy it immediately! So instead, we must put our full trust in anecdotes."

"Sounds like a solid plan."

A CHAIR.

"I was close on the tail of the Precious Lore in Dublin. I had the Cowering Sigil in my possession, and for safe keeping I entrusted it to your Uncle. He'd seemed like a nice guy. I'd thought he would at least stick around till morning." His expression soured. "The trail went cold, that steamy night. It has been a long, hard road working to find this estate. And once I detected your feelings for the Head Inspector, I knew I had to hurt her—you would never turn over the book otherwise."

What! I turned to see if the Solicitor-General was hearing this confession. This book-mad fiend had subverted the aims of Justice to further his own biblio-obsession. But if the Solicitor-General was firmly in the pocket of Peapoddy (or, it should be considered, whoever was backing his operation)—Justice here was a sham.

I wondered, not entirely idly, if the entire murder investigation had been but a front for Peapoddy to gain legitimate access to the Manor. Had the Head Inspector been in on the game? Or had she been Peapoddy's unwilling pawn this whole time?

"You should have come by a month ago, and asked nicely," I scowled. "I probably would have handed you the book at the front door. Things might have been different. I might not have figured this all out."

"Figured what out?" Peapoddy glared.

"The old Head Inspector wouldn't go along with your plan, now, would he?" I retorted. "He and I always had an understanding—he left me alone, and I didn't send people to poke him annoyingly while he slept. But he wasn't willing to play games with you, was he?

Of course not—look at you, you foppish foreigner. So you had him removed, and found a new Head Inspector. A beautiful one, to lower my defences. This has been your plan all along!" By the end I was shrieking—the constables rushed forward and seized my arms as the Solicitor-General strode over.

"Now see here, that's enough out of you," he growled. "These matters go far above *all* our heads. No matter how much it may seem like it—not everything revolves around you."

"Doesn't it?" I sneered in return. "Then why are you all in *my* house?"

We reached the end of the hall-way, and the door to the library stood solidly before us. "I can't reach the keys," I told the constables with a haughty smirk. They let me go, but not before glancing at the Solicitor-General for his reluctant assent.

I fished for Uncle's huge key-ring, trying to remember which of the many jangling shards fit this door. For Peapoddy's sake I had to look like I knew what I was doing. After a few fumbles I turned the lock and slowly swung the door open.

As it was by now quite dark outside, the sky-lights provided no illumination. The hulking shapes of towering book-shelves sat silhouetted against the night. It was impossible to see—yet—that they were empty.

"I'll just go and turn up some lamps," I offered, moving into the room—but the brutish form of the Ectologist stopped me. "You'll stay out here," he rumbled.

Peapoddy nodded to the constables. "Find the lamps," he told them. They and the Ectologist spread out into the room, and I knew it would be only a matter of seconds before the light would put an end to my charade. In a split-second, my master-tactician brain conceived of and discarded a dozen plans of action, from *start pretending not to understand English* to *go back to the kitchen for more crisps.*

Finally, I alighted on *claim that there's a secret compartment in the room,* as presumably there *would* be one of some sort, somewhere in the room. Uncle loved him some secret compartments.

The lamps flared up. Peapoddy's eyes widened. But I spoke up quickly: "The room will look empty at first. There is a hidden passage."

Peapoddy inched into the room, his book-sense tingling, feeling the air for any evidence. The musty smell of aging paper, which I hadn't been able to totally eradicate with kerosene, reassured him, and his step quickened. The Solicitor-General followed, slowly.

And then, a terrific crash sounded from the direction of the North Atrium! The walls shook as a terrible screeching filled every inch of space. Could my luck be so fine? *Bat-creatures*. In the Manor.

Peapoddy and the others reeled. I felt the weight of the key-ring in my hand—and before I realised what I was about to do, I had already slammed the library door and bent the key in the lock. That terrible, shocking sound still reverberated in my skull—but the door was locked, and I was free. When Fortune hands you bat-creatures, by heaven, you *take* them.

I ran, my damp trousers chafing, the hall-way moving by in a blur. As I rounded the narrow stair-well, I heard the smashing sound of the roof collapsing in the North Atrium. The stairs bucked beneath me with the impact; I was thrown to the ground and tumbled several steps down the passage. The sounds before me were horrific—cries and screeches and the furious, leathery flapping of a hundred evil wings tore at the bounds of my sanity.

But there was no other way out, as I had long since barricaded all other doors in a particularly mischevious flaunting of the Fire Code.

I caught my breath, readied my spirit, and made for the heart of the terror.

23: ESCAPE.

MY EYES REELED AT THE SIGHT THAT greeted me: bat-creatures, over a dozen, each taller than a man and wider than a woman, more ugly than the lepers down on Leper Blvd., and more deadly than the Shiv-Packing Shiv-Master of Shiv-Master Lane.

I stumbled down the last few steps into what used to be the North Atrium—now simply rubble, the roof collapsed by the beasts' smashing entrance, and walls and columns brought down with it. The opposite stair-case was utterly destroyed, my bed-chamber unreachable; I was stuck with the (slightly sotted) trousers I currently wore. No matter, as groinal moisture was the second-to-least of my current problems. (The least being, where to change the Canadian nickel I had just found in my vest-coat pocket.)

The bat-creatures heard me immediately, of course; they had ears the size and shape of conch-shells, ugly, misshapen conch-shells the shape of bat-ears, and each beat of my fluttering heart was no doubt a thunderous bongo war-drum of terror to their delicate senses. They wheeled to face me, their eyes glowing a fierce red that reminded me of very angry blue-jays, if they were red and glowed. I was trapped like a lemur.

I considered everything I knew or had heard about the creatures. Their only known weakness was the sonic assault of a church-bell or gong, as the cathedral in Stamps-upon-Staves illustrated multiple times each day, but I had no such clanging-devices here—save for the old coal-fired Casio key-board that took up the large part of an upstairs bedroom. I'd acquired the piece from an Okinawan with a hare-lip in exchange for letting him borrow my moustache for a job interview, and had thought briefly that I could make a few coins busking some dope rhythms—but the device weighed three tonnes and required a team of oxen to transport

and a full crew of shovelers to keep lit, and I was also really bad at playing, so business had been slim down at the board-walk. In any case, it was inaccessible now.

These creatures had probably been driven mad by church-bells o'er in Stamps and were seeking any form of refuge, and had been attracted to the faux-Heracles in the North Atrium foyer—that plaster-and-rope replica constructed by the slimy Peapoddy in order to tease me into confessing murder. I'd heard that the joint-wax much prized by oversized-marionette manufacturers was actually an extract of bat pheromone, harvested with great difficulty during summer middays while the bats slept in their freakish inverted fashion. Highly-trained wax-men using long, pointy hooks trod as silently as possible so as not to wake the slumbering creatures, sometimes moving as slowly as six inches per hour. (It was a guild one had to be born into—I'd looked into it, as they had excellent dental, and at the time I'd been eating a lot of glass for some reason.)

In any case, that dreadful combination of destroyed manor roof (thanks to the trespassing aero-carriage, an incident from which I was still waiting on the insurance payment) and joint-wax aroma wafting heavenward through the jagged opening seems to have brought a whole coven of them slavering hungrily into my house. I watched them smear that paraffin on themselves with a giddy sort of glee. It was a strangely stimulating display, and inspired in me an idea for a potentially-lucrative stage show that I might have pursued were the situation otherwise not so dire.

I shifted a bit and glimpsed the crushed fingers of Heracles protruding from the rubble of the stair-case, the automaton having been utterly destroyed by the manic fiends in search of that lumpy yellow aromatic. My heart soared—for the dictation-cylinder containing my murderous confession had been hidden within that lurching statue, and now, pray hope, it was flattened.

The present situation, however, left no time for even the most fleeting form of self-congratulation (and my bed-chamber was inaccessible, anyhow). My motion had attracted attention. All frantic

wax-love ceased as the bat-fiends reared to full height, extending their massive wings as far as the confines of the walls would allow and then further, brushing and knocking against each other and crashing everything within reach to the floor. I spied the front door, a far run across dangerous territory, and judged my chances of making a run for the open portico.

A horrific screech filled the room! The beasts were calling to me, rather than attacking outright; this was a good sign, so long as my ears didn't burst from the assault. Despite the horrible-ness of the sound, each second they screamed was one less that they were ripping the flesh from my meat-cloaked bones. No sense postponing the effort; I made for the door at once.

A great flurry blasted me from behind as massive wings rushed and twisted after me. The indoors blocked their manoeuvre-ability somewhat; I turned to shield my eyes from dust and swirling shards of debris. They headed me off, blocking the door, and I soon found myself swiftly surrounded by reeking fur and flashing talons.

And then, a flash of movement—a small figure scurried beneath them, hunched over and winding like a rugby-brat between the heavy hunks of marble and wood that littered the North Atrium. It was my basement hunch-back, running full-speed towards me, with something in his arms—"Follow me!" his gnarled throat croaked, and I complied without delay.

"Hunchy!" I cried, gasping for air as I pumped the ground at a sprint. "Where are your bells? You can rid us of this menace in an instant by tolling your graceful song!"

"I can't, Master!"

"Oh, I'm sure you're very good at it!" I said. "This no time to be ashamed. I'm sorry that I've never asked to hear you play before—"

"No, I can't because I haven't any bells," he hissed. "It's just a stereotype." He spun the object in his hands: a coil of rope with a weight at one end. "I haven't any bells, because *you* haven't any bells—it's *your* basement, Master, and I merely tend it." A great

surge of pride quickened my step. I knew at once that this wretched, deformed creature was my man through and through.

A creature near us whirled, its red eyes flashing in the night, and the hunch-back let fly with the rope—it sailed through the dusty air, and with a sudden *clang* two gas-lamps were free from their sconces and airborne! Kerosene spattered through the dusty chamber, followed by white, hot light. Within moments the entire place was ablaze, the previous chaos of the evening having done nothing if not stock the room with ample kindling.

The bats screeched and fluttered towards the roof, smashing against one another, striking at anything that moved. Hunchy leapt over a flying claw, dodging what would have been a killing blow, and tucked-and-rolled impressively through a narrow opening in the wall. I realised that the opening used to be a hall-way, now mostly blocked by collapsed columns and sagging wall-boards.

Through the opening I saw him lever a panel up from the floor—"Quickly, into the basement, and away," he croaked.

There was no way—the opening was far too narrow for my robust, unhunchbacked frame. But in the other direction bright talons stretched for my person, so I ran and leapt, feeling the barest whisper of razor across my back—then, somehow, I was through, my coat falling into ribbons as I tumbled and rolled and, finally, stood.

The opening to the basement was dark, and it stank of all the horrible, fœtid things I'd dumped down there over the years. That place had seriously been my nasty-trash go-away hole.

But behind me the manor was ablaze, the bats still wheeling in burning agony, and before me the hunch-back was already three steps deep into that inky blackness where odours seemed to take on physical form.

I sucked in and coughed on a last, big breath of above-air, then pulled the floor-panel closed behind me and I descended.

24: INTO THE DEPTHS.

WITH EACH GROANING STEP I FELT HOT, oppressive fear settle with ever-greater weight into my bowel. The slick stone of the basement stair-way felt alien beneath my feet; it was covered in goop of some kind—whether alien or animal or simply rancid human, I cared not to discover.

Ahead of me, the curled-over form of the hunch-back led the way by the flickering light of a dented lantern clutched in one gnarled claw. "This way, Master," he spat, as he led me far beneath the surface.

Suddenly, I knew the goop: I was seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting the remnants of my late uncle's grand seal-fat insulation scheme! This pursuit had overtaken the latter decades of his life, so assured was he that an estate of the Manor's prodigious size could only be protected from costly heat-loss by extensive subterranean blubbering. As the cellar-fatting was but one of the many eccentric projects of his that I had abandoned completely upon assuming residency (along with watering the garden where he'd planted a few shillings decades ago, hoping to grow a money tree; and, ironically, reinforcing the ceiling against sudden, severe bat-creature attacks), the oily mess was slowly seeping into the earth below through the joists and seams in the basement walls and floors, and soon it wouldn't be anyone's problem, ever again.

"This is catastrophic," the hunch-back suddenly said, gesturing to a large crack in the stonework, shining his lantern to spill a shaky pool of light on the surface. I nearly bowled the freakish little creep over, but managed to catch myself (but not without slicking my palms with seal-goo).

"The seals are leaking," he continued, regarding the shimmering, quivering wetness on the wall, then swiping a finger and taking a taste. He gargled for a moment, then nodded with confir-

"THE MUSKET-BALL CAUGHT HIM IN THE CROTCH."—[SEE PAGE 651.]

mation. "With the thinning of the seal, the integrity of the support beams has been severely compromised." He touched a wooden pole, black and rotting with blubber-stains. It creaked ominously, and he jerked back.

Then he pointed a gnarled finger in my general direction. I had no doubt he would have gestured at me more precisely, were his spine not massively deformed. "This is your doing, Master," he sputtered. "*Old* Master understood the level of care that these old structures require. He spent every day lovingly and conscientiously procuring and installing the necessary insulation. But what have you done for us? Nothing—left an entire eco-system to rot!" Spittle made an arc from his buck-tooth in the lamp-light.

"What would you have me do?" I retorted. "Spend every day negotiating and haggling for seal-blubber in the marketplace? There are no seals around here! Its trade is carefully regulated! My foolish uncle gave up untold treasures haggling with smelly

merchants to pack this place with seal-fat. And you would have me do what, exactly?"

"He loved this house," Hunchy said softly. "You have brought shame to his legacy." He looked up, above our heads, towards where the North Atrium was surely burning to a cinder. As for Peapoddy and the others, trapped in the library as the flames grew ever closer—I shook my head to drive the thought from my mind. Dwelling on such things would only make me hungry.

"I fed you hunks of meat every day that I walked these halls," I told the creature. "You owe me that much."

"Aye, that you did," he nodded, a crude and savage approximation of reasonable human expression. "And that has purchased you your life today. Now, you must come with me, to the Council—and we will explain what you must do to save our civilisation."

"I have plenty of problems of my own!" I shot back. "And you want me to drop everything for—for *what,* exactly? Your crumbling empire? Some sprawling underground society, teeming with life and culture, existing for decades unseen beneath the feet of regular people?"

"Regular!" He snorted. "The 'people' you call 'regular' are not 'fit' to 'lick' the 'boots' of the heroes down here."

"Watch it," I breathed. "I own you."

"You don't even know my name."

I stopped short, my next witty riposte dying on my tongue and reincarnating as befuddlement. This beast had a *name?* Like *sentient* things might?

"Of course I do!" I said quickly. "It's...Kiefer."

"It's Sandy!"

Wait, now I was confused. Sandy? Was the thing a dude or a chick?

Suddenly the ground shook with a fearsome thunder that reverberated through the darkness. I stared vainly at the tunnel ceiling above me, but only a fine strand of dust, drifting through the lamplight, betrayed any commotion at all.

And then the ground heaved and shifted. I lost my footing on a heap of seal-fat. The hunch's lantern was lost to the darkness; the sound of the glass shattering against squishy seal-goop was the last thing I heard.

As I floundered for balance, reaching blindly in the darkness for any purchase, on any surface, the walls collapsed around me. My ears popped. Silence descended.

I stretched my jaw, trying to work it in a sort of chewing motion, and in the tumbling blackness I was rewarded with a mouthful of seal-fat, rock-slime, and something wet that I would later learn was dog-carcass. Remind me to share the recipe; it's surprisingly good over Melba toast, with a stiff chaser of turpentine to kill the regret.

Face stuffed with this delicacy, I struck the ground hard, my wrists twisting on unseen rocks, my ankles kicked out by falling timbers and slippery surfaces, all of it a bizarre, sightless, soundless, purely tactile experience. My eyes ached for shapes in the nothingness; but this far underground, with the lamp gone, there was not even the barest hint of light.

As for my ears—well, who knew what *their* problem was. Between the fumes, and the pressure-gradient of the cave-in, and the many blows over time, and the bat-creatures' horrible sounds, and that brief burst of Herb Alpert a few hours ago, and all the years of ear-hole abuse with cotton-swabs *even though it says not to right on the package,* it frankly could have been anything. But the result was the same.

I was trapped underground in the darkness. I yelled and screamed my head off, beckoning for—what was his/her name? *Sandy*—or anyone at all to come save me, buried in the chaos of my own making.

But I couldn't tell if they heard me. *I* couldn't hear me. For I had been stricken deaf.

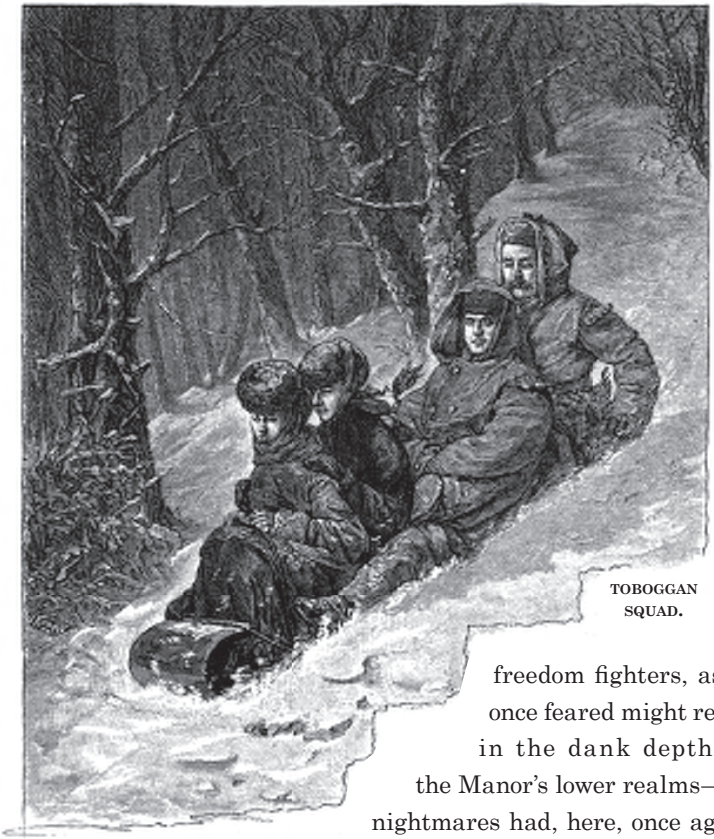
25: A SHAFT OF LIGHT.

I AWOKE TO ROCKING. I HAD HEARD nothing, of course, beyond a faint buzzing deep inside my ear-canal, as if a hornet had taken up residence and was now gently snoring its way through an afternoon knocked out on malt liquor and found pills. Bobbing yellow light bounced all around me; there were folk with lanterns here, and torches, and a single bio-luminescent swamp-frog, its glow the wan green of captivity and forced labour. The sad amphibian peered out from between lashed cell-bars of a makeshift wicker cage held at the end of a staff; its skin shone through the branches, casting cross-hatched shadows onto dark cavern walls. *Freedom,* it seemed to plead of me with its sad, black eyes, only one of which I could see at a time.

I was being carried by several small figures whose form I could not discern. It seemed to require about a dozen of them to bear my weight. From this I deduced that they were likely mythical gnomes, or else perhaps the mining-dwarves of lore, or else hopelessly stunted and disfigured human-like creatures worthy of nothing but my utter disgust. As we entered a large, lighted chamber I realised that my lattermost notion had been the correct one.

As my mind reeled with a sudden blast to my remaining senses, I became painfully aware of my deafness. I felt the ground shake, even through the many-fingered grasp of the sickly whelps who bore me at the end of their grabby-limbs. I saw a large audience of grotesqueries, stamping their probably-webbed feet, as I was borne into a sort of coliseum. It was a wide-open space, about the size of the Great Hall in the Manor, surrounded on every side by chipped stone blocks arranged into a makeshift amphitheatre.

On every level of the arena I espied the most vile and misshapen beings ever to huddle in cowering conspiracy beneath the varied by-ways of Civilisation. Why, this was a veritable colony of zombie



TOBOGGAN SQUAD.

freedom fighters, as I'd once feared might reside in the dank depths of the Manor's lower realms—my nightmares had, here, once again, with great fervour, come to pass.

Everywhere I looked, new horrors greeted my eyes. These beasts schemed; they made tea from ham-leavings and raindrops; they cultivated a fearsome immunity to fumigation. Though I could not hear them, I could tell from their uniform gasping expressions that they were shouting at me. Some of them hurled dog-parts; others made rude motions with digits so twisted that every gesture inadvertently resembled an elaborate gang-sign. Others may have composed extemporaneous poetry decrying every facet of my character, for all I knew—I couldn't hear a thing.

But gradually it dawned on me this was a sham court-room. They were judging me, here in the Earth's rectum. I stood in the centre of their gathering, still weak on my feet from being crushed by rocks and buried alive. How much time had passed between that moment and this, I had no way of knowing; my trousers, formerly sopping with bladder-water, were at present caked with seven layers of nast but largely dry. That, plus a rapidly-growing hunger, were my only clues to the passage of time.

One figure stepped forward: it was my hunch-back. I'd already forgotten his (her?) name. I had a vague recollection that this gnarled beast may be a woman, for some reason; the notion seemed odd, however, as it would certainly make for an ugly example of the fairer sex. In my mind I had long labelled the creature Hunchy, because I'd once had a "hunch" that that was his (her?) name. Hunchy spoke to me quickly, in what were probably low tones. I responded with, "I'm quite sorry, but I'm utterly deaf."

Hunchy cocked his (her?) head at me quizzically, like I'd seen many a dog do in my time; I could tell that he (she? this confusion was becoming tiresome) was debating whether my handicap was sincere, or whether I was enacting some sort of ruse.

The twisted creature began to pace around me in a circle—I had the good sense not to follow it, as my dervish licence had been suspended ever since the ball-bearing incident, and the last thing I needed was an inquest by the Whirly-Dirvs on top of everything else.

Hunchy begain clapping its dusty claws at random, behind me, to gauge my reaction. I steeled myself to make no response, and in truth I felt my vigour begin to return as a thick well-spring of anger began to burble deep in my intestine.

Apparently satisfied, Hunchy addressed the audience. Whatever was said only riled them to greater heights of fury; and I could tell from their savage expressions what it was they longed for. It was a collective expression I'd grown plenty familar with over the years: they meant to hold me responsible for some long-standing ill.

I watched them ready themselves for imminent en-mobbing. This would end poorly for me, and Hunchy was having no luck pacifying them. In the dense dimness I could not make out more than their slavering thirst for blood.

Two of my senses sprang into full alertness:

A shaft of light suddenly penetrated the cavern from a fissure high above—a thin white beam cutting briskly through the dust-filled air.

And through the layered odours of seal-fat, dog-remnants, and misshapen civilisation, the far-off scent of wharf-cheese tickled my nostrils.

We were not far underground. The sun had risen. The cheese-twirlers would be winding their morning curds for the fishermen's brunch-hour. It was a time of day I knew well.

I was drawn toward the scent, finding myself scrabbling over rocks and boulders, wending my way towards a narrow passage that seemed to lead Above. The light continued to fill the arena.

I got my first good, illuminated look at the underground creatures when my way was blocked by their hulking champion—a menacing fellow of sour expression who stood about to my collar, and who must have weighed as much as my wet bathing-trousers. Deprivation of proper nutrition, revelry &c. had made these folks not just angry, but pitifully weak.

All at once they descended upon me, their many vicious blows like so many pummellings with marshmallows. I waded through them stiffly but steadily, dashing them against one another like swinging a cow's-leg through a wading-pool of eggshells, feeling their brittle, un-fortified skeletons shatter under my grip like so many glass swizzle-sticks.

From every passage-way I passed they piled onto me, attempting to choke me with their numbers, drawing their women and children and larvae and blobuous, mutated cripples from every cranny and cave, meaning to drown me with their slavering bulk. And they might have succeeded, too, as body after body added to the assault, holding my limbs, making my movements slow and un-deadly,

the hornet's soft, snoring buzz echoing all the while. The sun's light faded as their continued battering forced me ever-deeper into the caverns, and with it, my strength; darkness returned until the only light was the sad green glow of the swamp-frog in his wicker cage, bobbing in the hands of the mob.

I stumbled sideways into a wide-open passage and saw Heracles. The *real* Heracles, the marble statue from the North Atrium that had been secreted out by Peapoddy and his minions and replaced with the soulless automaton that had, in turn, attracted the bat-creatures—*these* vile voles, these subterranean monsters had actually *performed* the exchange that had, indirectly, led to every problem I'd experienced to-day. *These* creatures were in league with *them*. The statue that had so bravely guarded the stairway to my bedchamber with its toned, alabaster physique was *down here,* lying in a pool of seal-fat, propped against what appeared to be a toilet-pit, no doubt cursing its own downfall and the conspirators that had forced it from its grand position.

I assumed that shame of Heracles and amplified it, grabbing the glowing frog from a gibbering creature and ripping the amphibian from its wicker prison, liberating it, watching it glow bright white with the pungent air of liberty, letting its light power me back out in the direction I hoped freedom lay, detecting and following the barest hints of that old familiar cheese-scent—feeling nothing in my veins but a blinding, fortifying rage, sensing it work its way from my thumping heart into my pounding fists, forcing my way forward through throngs of battered bodies inch by heavy inch, tossing those masses of twisted flesh aside one after the other after the other, wondering how many more of these things would have to die before—

I broke through. A sewage-grate. Cobblestones. The wharf-front. A sharp, tingly cheese-breese to wit.

I gave a snarling creature one last, desperate kick to the face, tossed the frog onto the street before me, and heaved myself out into the sunlight. ⌖

26: RETURN AT DAWN.

THE SUN HAD JUST CRESTED THE SEA, and bands of golden light filtered through the fluttering pennants and sails being drunkenly raised for the day's mercantilism. I drank in the sight with a great, heaving breath of fresh morning air. I thought I detected a hint of smoke, but the sky farther inland hung dense with cloud; there was no way to tell if ash stained the atmosphere. The fate of the Manor was still a mystery, for the moment at least.

I thanked the frog and left it to its own devices; it hopped away and was promptly run over by a runaway kelp-waggon. As for me, I was still deaf as a post; the snoring-hornet buzz in my ear canal had settled to a dull thrum. No matter; I'd miss the wharf-rat cries for squid-for-a-quid, cheese-on-a-spun-rod, peanut-butter-and-jellyfish-on-multigrain, and whale-egg-on-a-platter-made-of-old-wood-crusted-with-what-are-probably-barnacles. I'd also miss the rat-juicers' shanty, but that was no great loss since as a child I'd heard it a million times on long buggy-rides (my parents had had it on tape).

It was the smells that swept over me like a wave: the terrible odour of the masses, all the spices of human exertion baked into churning vile sweat-cakes. After hours stewing in the stench of underground monsters drenched in seal-fat (a bitter flavour, but with a nutty after-taste) and bat-creatures (largely a sickly-sweet old-fruit tang with a dash of cardamon), the more familiar reek of Man-kind in General was a swift, sensory homecoming.

Still, there was a reason I'd instituted a strict vinegar-soaking policy before venturing to this part of town, and it was only secondarily because of the overwhelming unwashed-ness of People. For *there* it was: the distinctive, slightly porky odour of old Abu Fromage's secret cheese formula. Still here, on the waterfront, mingling

with the gull-poop and bilge-poop and clam-poop. Still wafting on the sea-breeze like an ill wind of Fate.

But such a thing simply could not be! The last time I'd smelled that sacred scent on this side of the world, I'd traced its source to a leprous old pier-brawler mixing his inside-water with waste runoff from a third-rate, un-pedigreed cheesery. And yet *here it was,* a pungent boldness that cut through the sea-air like a steam-fired torpedo. I would know what powered this aroma.

I cocked my nostrils and made my way for the source, honing in with a power and a potency only enhanced by my lack of hearing. Undistracted by jealous glares from longshoremen, unwiled by seamen's she-men plying their trade on the board-walk, undeterred by urchins that I trampled to a pulp without pausing, I crossed wharf and market, street and cobble-way, bridge and dale—until I found myself unexpectedly fitting in with the environs, my filthy, bladder-water-stain'd apparel positively *de rigueur* for the neighbourhood. I had crossed Admiralty Way. I was in Kipper-town.

I was quickly surrounded by dirty thugs, bouncing black-jacks in their hand and cudgels on their clavicles. The Kippers were a band of street-toughs, bound by an iron code of honour that included many ridiculous elements, such as requiring group pooping—if one member was absent, they all had to wait. Due largely to procedural rules such as this, they were a rather minor player as far as the City on the whole went, but I happened to have a connexion to this particular faction: I'd pledged as a Kipper during the year of University I'd spent begging for old buttons, perfecting the cheese-trade, and busking terribly using a wooden spoon and my own skull. My Brotherhood in the Fellowship of Kippers may have been long ago, but it was time to see if I still remembered the secret gestures that would identify me as a friend.

I clapped twice, then spun around and imitated the swimming pattern of the noble pickled herring. I struggled to remember the mnemonic for how many flails to make with my flippers—the wrong number and they would descend on me instantly, as a (presumably hostile) infiltrator who'd gotten the pass-dance incorrect was many

THE WHARF-FRONT.

orders of magnitude more dangerous than a simple bystander who'd wandered down the wrong alley searching for pudding or sex.

It seemed to work; their gestures softened, and they turned on the fellow who'd first noticed me and pulled out his switch-blade. They killed him with several quick blows about the face, then strung his ceremonial shawl about my own neck, clapping several times in unison to welcome me. *One in, one out* was another of the ways of the Fellowship, and a hard man it made you.

I made use of my newfound authority at once. "Where is the cheese-smell coming from?" I asked. "And I'm deaf, so you'll have to gesture."

Suddenly, a familiar face rushed from the crowd, its lower half flapping. The lad was quite excited, tears streaming down his coal-stained face, revealing in stripes what had once been fair bourgeois skin, now soiled by a brutal life of labour under the sun. With a start I realised this was my stupid nephew Josiah.

He of the "contemporary" art; the tap-dancing rat-brigade, the deep-throated pipe-bowing, the fæcal paintings. I had lost a good

hat when last I ventured into his deep hall-ways of idiotic exhibits, and here he was now, evidently ruined by his own preposterous attempts at novelty and bound up with the Kippers. He probably owed them all money, and was working off the debt on a peg. "Good to see you too," I said, possibly too loudly, as he leapt up and down and launched an awkward embrace. To stave off further conversation I promptly said, "I'm deaf, so you can shut your fool mouth."

The lad's eyes went positively saucer-shaped. He immediately produced a sketch-pad, where he began to write with a fury that amazed the gathered Kippers; they sucked in their jaws with positive bewilderment. I couldn't make heads nor tails of the scrawled characters, as I've not yet heard a decent argument for literacy; I could only tell him thus, to the effect of "I think reading and writing is for flopsies and Irishmen, and have had no part of it my many days."

This brutal fact of life was a bit harder for Josiah to swallow, but it was intriguing to watch the rusty old creative-gears work behind the boy's eyes. Then he seemed to have a notion, and departed my presence with haste. Finally, an outcome I could get behind! The boy thus banished from my mind, I turned to the nearest Kipper and tried to practise the old hand-shake, but fouled up the turn-around-reach-behind-stones-jostle.

Josiah soon returned, to my chagrin, holding a small wooden box in his white-flushed fingers, It was his set of picto-gramme cards, each emblazoned with a badly-rendered picture. He worked them deftly, I should admit, like a thirteen-card-monte player upon a cardboard stand with every audience member an accomplice.

And then a strange thing began to happen.

I understood his meaning.

Perhaps it was the otherwise total deprivation of communication I'd been subject to, but I actually fully grasped an understanding from his shuffling, displaying, and combining of picto-grammes. Fire + House + Moon = *The Manor burnt all night.* Sadness + Fire + Distance = *We were worried, but unsure.* Gold + Barrel + Man picking nose = *Treasure is hidden in my sinus cavity.* I took the

hint and rubbed self-consciously at my face. The other guys thought I was scratching; I totally played it cool.

"In the Manor, when I left," I told the lad softly, unable to accurately gauge the volume of my speech but doing my best to approximate low tones, "were several constables, a certain Special Investigator Peapoddy, and the Solicitor-General. I fear they may not have escaped the conflagration."

At this every head turned towards us. Apparently I had not been as quiet as I'd intended. The Kippers had no great love for the constabulary, but neither did they ken to un-sanctioned violence that might throw off the delicate balance of power on the streets. I thought back to the many lonely nights I'd felt the heady menace of the Kippers and their many rival groups through the elevated windows of my rich-man's carriage. *Society is coming down, big man,* was what their gaze shouted; they were keenly attuned to any shifting zephyr in the howling gusts of City authority. I suddenly realised that this whole affair may yet have repercussions far from the grounds of the Manor.

Josiah worked the cards quickly and surely: Army + Boots + House.

We were going to the Manor. All of us, apparently.

27: SIFTING THROUGH THE ASHES.

As we marched closer to the estate, the air steadily darkened with ash; the white mist of morning hung brown and acrid with soot o'er Waverly Hill. I was rather enjoying the freedom that deafness brought; it meant that I could be as talkative as I liked, and not have to trade blathering-duties with a conversation-partner. Normally I tired quickly of silently ticking the seconds like a metronome while some tiresome bore went on and on about this or that Matter of Great Import, waiting

NEIGHBOURS FLEE THE BLAZE.

for the chance to return the subject of the conversation to myself; in fact, in many such cases I'd simply said my piece and then murdered the other rather than suffer his constant chatter.

However, with my ears still groggily buzzing like a wasp's nest on Ambien, there was no risk of being forced to listen to any tedious yapping—so on I went, describing to my stupid nephew Josiah the many fierce adventures I'd suffered in the last day, from Peapoddy and the Tome to Hunchy, through to my daring, frog-assisted escape. I may have embellished the account here and there, as the finest bards are wont to do, maximising my prodigious feats of strength and quite frankly minimising the role of the freaky hunchback in the whole affair.

Suddenly I realised that, caught in a wild frenzy of orgiastic oration, I'd abandoned the audience some distance behind; they'd stopped, their attention diverted towards the smouldering embers visible even through the wrought-iron fence. We'd arrived at the Manor.

Not much was left—though it was hard to tell, really, because we were far from the only spectators gaping at the rails. I noted the wizened Mr S_____ of the Committee for Genteel Relations among Neighbours, poking his weaselly nose between the bars and making a general nuisance of himself. He was probably an all-right sort, being a fellow man-brander, but probably oddly uncomfortable discussing the pastime in public, as was usually the case for devotées of the age-old sport.

Peering 'twixt hats, we caught sad sight of the once-formidable (and Garden-Society prize-winning) manse reduced to so much charcoal and bat-creature-leavings. I imagined the far-off bells of Stamps-upon-Staves poetically tolling their vigil; if only we'd had such a bell, to keep the fearsome winged beasts away, none of this might have happened.

Surveying the rubble, it seems that we *did* have a big bronze bell, and a bell-tower, even. In the South Courtyard. I thought back—I didn't recall *ever* being in the South Courtyard, or at least not since that visiting carnival had upended its trolley-cart of pinheads in the square and we hadn't been able to flush them from the gum-trees—it had been far easier simply to lock the door and forget about them. As I surveyed the heap of charred, avocado-shaped skeletons in the vicinity of the South Courtyard, I realised that the creatures must have been multiplying the whole time—the remains were piled four deep in places. That might have become a problem later, save for the blaze. One crisis averted by another, it seemed—more proof that the Universe had a Plan.

Truthfully, it was hard to gauge a precise sense of the damage from this distance. The fire brigade had blockaded the gate, presumably to head off egress for escapees from the conflagration; their simple-minded ruthlessness impressed me, as I'd had the

whole red-capped lot pegged for poufters and fops, always posing for calendars and such. The crowd blocked any closer view, but that's why I had Kippers; quickly, I bade them hoist me atop their bodies, and if they complained, I heard none of it. Three or four of the strapping chaps hefted me above head-level, and I surveyed the scene.

The structure was blackened nearly entirely, with many timbers half-burnt or eaten away totally, though the mighty statue of Zeus mounting a pelican seemed to be largely intact. The property was crawling with constables, most grunting heavily with spades, dumping bones by the score into thick yellow wheel-barrows. They were utterly destroying my garden, turning over fine, brown soil along with the blackened bones of last year's kitchen-help, each stroke of the spade further ruining any chances for champion bulbs this year.

And in the midst of it all—the Right Hon. Mr D_____, Chief Magistrate, sifted about the ruins of the East Wing, poking right about where I had ushered those five into the Library and locked the door. Peapoddy, the Solicitor-General, even the brutish Ectologist—had *they* survived the blaze?

A shadow fell over Mr D_____'s wide brow and he looked up to see a bizarre flying-contraption, apparently manned by aged cripples, having emerged from the smoke and now looping in slow circles about the wreckage. So *they'd* made it out all right, at least.

One of the knobby fellows aloft spotted me in the crowd. I couldn't explain it; I'd have thought his eye-sight about as acute as a cinder-block. But the coot pointed a gnarled, accusatory finger directly at me from that creaking aero-carriage—which wouldn't have mattered, if the magistrate hadn't followed the gesture with his eyes.

D_____ looked straight at me. Even a hundred yards away, dirtied in full Kipper-grime, I froze in fear. I dropped from my perch, nearly braining a Kipper in my haste. *(One out, one in*—we would've had to make a speedy recruit from the gathered crowd, and I don't know if old Mr S_____ of the C.G.R.N. was limber enough to execute the secret handshake.) Peeking through the

"WE HUNKERED DOWN IN A GENTLY-SWAYING HAY-WAGGON."—[SEE NEXT PAGE.]

shoulders of the gathered crowd, I saw the magistrate gesture to his constables—they were coming, they were in pursuit, and no naughty cartoon scrawled on the front door would stop the man now. I turned to Josiah and the Kippers, opening my mouth to bellow—

With a dreadful, crinkling, crunching *pop,* my hearing returned. A wave of fluid seemed to slosh along the under-side of my face. I stumbled, clutching at Mr S_____, working my jaw, speaking too loudly—"Pardon, pardon," I told the old man, removing my hands before he got any ideas I simply didn't have time for.

The first thing I heard was the magistrate's voice from fifty yards away: "Ring the Head Inspector! Ring her warden at the hospital! I want an arrest warrant issued—"

I didn't hear the rest. Not due to deafness, but rather rapture:

Lara was alive.

28: TO THE HOSPITAL.

IT WAS THAT MAD PEAPODDY WHO nearly dashed her brains out," I explained to Josiah and the rest, as we hunkered down in a gently swaying hay-waggon. The most brazen of our troupe would occasionally peek betwixt the slats, peering thus and about for the navy-tinged brass of the constabulary on our tail, but so far we'd gotten away clean. A quick duck-and-run and we'd managed to clamber aboard this waggon headed for the Hospital, stocked high with enema-hay, premium-grade from Sweden if my nose was any indication. After such stressful minutes at the gates of the Manor, it was nice to lay back a bit and watch the sun burn the fog to ribbons.

The Kippers looked up to me, I could tell; one of their own made good in high society, so flush with wealth that I'd rather waste a new ham on meat-rugby than hand it to a drunkard; so above the cares of these grime-caked cobblestone cads that I'd fain spend eighteen hours soaking my body in vinegar before even considering coming 'round those rough alleys where they'd shank a man for the glimmer of a hope of a promise of a prospect of an empty can they could turn in for recycling. I was a hero to them, a prince made pauper but for the moment.

I wondered what they would expect of me once the present ugliness was resolved and I was back atop Waverly Hill wearing laundered trousers and bandying servants about with a riding-crop. I didn't dwell much on the prospect, for as it was said, reciprocity in this town could sting like a bull-dog if one wasn't careful to watch one's mill-wheels. (Or something like that.)

The Kippers didn't know exactly *why* we were headed for the Hospital, or that every agonizingly slow creak of the waggon's wheels was like a rusty nail being driven ever-deeper into my hollow gizzard. I wanted to spring from this butt-hay and bound

down the road like a prancing gazelle in dirty trousers, wasting not a single moment before laying eyes on my dearest love, the fetching and wounded Lara. I yearned to take her gingerly in my muddy arms and cradle her to my filthy waist-coat. I wanted to rock her gently until her blood knit every last wound she had sustained from that fiendish Peapoddy with his overly artful hair-style.

I wanted to make her my own. And if she woke up it would be a nice bonus too.

I knew the Kippers were not posing as my personal mercenary beggar-army simply to further the aims of my romance; rather, they were forming shrewd alliances for the day soon to come when legions of leprous rag-swaddlers would rise from the streets and begin to throw metaphorical stones of revolution at the bourgeoisie. Already some had begun throwing literal stones, and with the Solicitor-General currently missing (perhaps burnt to a cinder in the Manor) and the Head Inspector ill abed, the Chief Magistrate certainly had his fat hands full with law-enforcement. I resolved to lay as low as necessary to avoid his ire—and if it meant stuffing my face deep into butt-hay for an hour and a half, well, that was just how things had to go. I wondered if Josiah had picto-gramme cards for "straw + stench + laxative".

Turns out, he did, and was oh-so-happy to discuss the matter—but thankfully, we arrived at the Hospital just before his lecture digressed into foot-notes. We burrowed deep into the hay as the waggon-driver (who must have been six hundred years of age, though he moved like a spry four-fifty) eased his cart up to the Hospital's back-door loading-dock—then we scurried from the waggon into the dark halls before he could reach the bales with his pitch-fork.

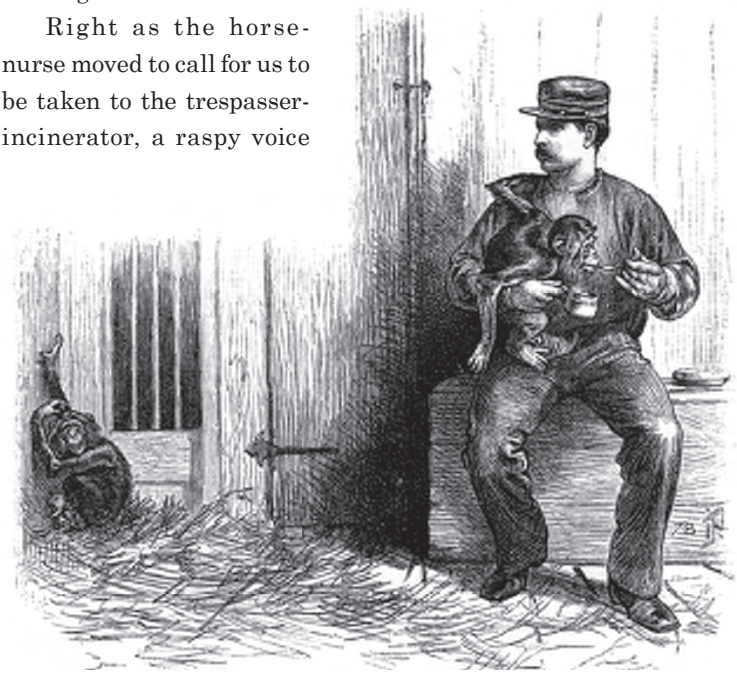
Once inside the Hospital, we remained suavely inconspicuous as we searched for Lara's room, or at least as inconspicuous as a dozen dirty men wearing questionable moustaches could remain in a hospital. There were so many rooms she could be in! Was she in the trepanation complex? Or perhaps having her humours bled in the leechery? We passed theatre after theatre as doctors practised

the ground-breaking surgical techniques of the modern era—in one, the clinical application of jelly-fish as a treatment for acne; in another, bare-chested M.D.s ground away at a gangrenous torso with a lumberjack-saw while interns took careful notes between the regular goop-splurts endemic to the process. The net result was my queasy realization that I had no stomach for Science.

Josiah spotted a sign that he claimed read "Morgue/Chronic Coma Unit," and wanted to head that direction, but a horsey nurse in matronly garb stopped us in our tracks. "Hold it right there," she said, in a tone bespeaking a sense of impotent authority. "Where does yehs think *you're* all gettin' te?"

I flapped my tongue. I tried to work the ol' smooth-logic on her. It was actually going pretty well, until the terrifying image of spurting torso-goop returned unbidden to my mind's eye. I gagged on something chunky from my throat, then accidentally breathed it. I gaped at Josiah, wide-eyed—I needed a card with a picture of choking.

Right as the horse-nurse moved to call for us to be taken to the trespasser-incinerator, a raspy voice



"THE MONKEY SEEMED TO SENSE MY INTENTIONS."—[SEE PAGE 511.]

sounded to my right. "We're with them," one of the Kippers said, stepping forward and raising a knobby digit. The meagre chap indicated a raggy team of sailors across the lobby—tattooed and burly sorts, wharf-men through and through, poop-deckers to the grave sporting un-ironic beards. But they were dirty, like us, and to the female eye we must have all appeared a matched set.

With a huff the nurse let us be, though she kept eyes on us till we hesitantly shuffled over to the oar-dogs and pretended like we knew them. "Act like I'm saying something interesting," I told the first of them, adding a wide grin and a hearty handshake hello.

"Oi? Wot's that?" They had about three good eyes between six men, they smelled oppressively of tuna, and apparently they preferred brawling to hand-shaking. They burst into rum-soaked action, swinging wildly about with their hooks and peg-legs and cutlasses, at one point neatly cleaving an orderly in two. Instantly it was a ruckus, violence breaking out in every hall. Sailors lunged for Kippers; physicians were set upon by geriatric patients bearing grudges; a monkey-hater seized the chance to bum-rush a nearby organ-grinder. I was having a merry time smashing a wheel-chair about in a wide, crashing arc when suddenly I glimpsed a familiar face across the fray. A large, brutish, meaty face, clear on the other side of the hall.

It was the Ectologist. The second of the Head Inspector's twin ghost-detecting goons, the first of which I'd locked in the Library with the other crispy cops. This fellow seemed a bit lost without his spring-loaded doodads; he glanced quickly about at the developing mayhem, then ducked back into the doorway from which he'd emerged.

I looked back at Josiah and the Kippers, already girded for a fight to the salty finish. "I think she's over there," I called over the boisterous volume of the fray.

The ancient Kipper who'd spoken to the nurse nodded—crisply, serenely. Looking him full in the face, I couldn't shake the feeling that I knew him from somewhere, but in no way that I could place at the moment. "We'll handle affairs out here," was all he had to say.

THE BILGE-SMUGGLERS.

Keeping my head down, I barrelled full-steam across the melée, crashing through a few barnacled bodies on the way. I leapt off the back of a crouching cancer patient, gave the shrieking monkey a bit of a spank as I whipped by, then burst into a curtained-off resting room—finding myself abruptly face-to-face with the Ectologist.

And there was Lara, lying softly in a white-sheeted bed not three feet away. Her hair, un-bunned, striped her pillow with amber silk. Her skin was pale; her frame thin; her eyes closed. Her trunk rose and fell with the breath of a sparrow. She was alive. But just barely.

A shadow fell over her face. Frozen by the shock of seeing her, I hadn't noticed that the room was actually quite crowded.

Then came a voice that would echo in my nightmares if I ever slept again.

I didn't recognise the face—it was twisted and melted beyond the appearance of humanity. I didn't recognise the timbre of the words; fire had blackened that gruesome throat. But I recognised the foppy clothes.

Special Investigator Peapoddy stood at the window, the midday sun blasting him into silhouette.

"Well, hello again," he said. ⌖

29: CONFRONTATION.

SO YOU MADE IT OUT ALIVE," PEAPODDY wheezed through a twisted mask of burnt flesh. His crisp white waist-coat and breeches stood in stark contrast to my grime-encrusted attire. "If just barely, it seems."

"The fire was unexpected," I replied in as even a tone as I could manage. With the lovely Lara in the room (despite her apparent unconsciousness) I would take no chances with rudeness, as simple civility was basically free points in the calculus of love. "The hunch-back was driving off the bat-creatures. He lit the drapes; it was out of my hands from the first. Also, I didn't lock you in the Library—it was a gust of wind that slammed the door, and drat that rusty lock! I was trying to open it when the floor collapsed." Maybe he was buying it. "Also, I am innocent of anything that you think I may have done, ever."

"Fantastic tales of hunch-backs and bat-things notwith-standing," he said with what may have been a snarl, "that fire cost me too much to *ever* forgive."

At this, meaty fingers seized my delicate, bony wrists and wrenched me off-balance. I swung my neck around, but heavy hands clamped my shoulders to hold me still. I felt hot breath on my neck. This wasn't quite how I'd hoped my reunion with Lara would go, although I must admit there were a few key similarities.

Peapoddy traced one thin finger along Lara's silent face, the bridge of her nose luminous in the morning sunlight, her cheeks rosy with the flush of ailment. Her eyes did not stir beneath their lids. Only the slight rise and fall of her thin bed-cover betrayed that this was more than an exquisite marble statue lying before us, at least on par in craftsmanship with Zeus mounting a pelican. Peapoddy watched my jaw set as he touched her; he smiled as my eyes burnt with fury. He may have made some other expression too, but the

lumpy mass of goop that was his face was a bit hard to read. I think he may have raised an eyebrow at some point? But it may also have been gas.

"The situation has turned dire," he said at last. "Thus the Chief Magistrate has endowed me with especial authority. As acting Solicitor-General, I can draw charges against whom-ever I please. And as my first official act, I can think of none more appropriate than demanding justice for the unfortunate demise of the previous Solicitor-General."

So that thin man had died. I felt something akin to remorse at the thought of the reedy fellow crisping in the flame of my late uncle's late Library, various vital juices bubbling through his skin—but I was hungry enough already without adding that savoury aroma to the mix. I craned my captive neck to regard the Ectologist, a doughy road-block filling the door-frame. "And what of your partner?" I asked.

"Succumbed this last hour to his injuries, just next door," came the sad reply, and I shook my head.

"And for what?" I asked. "You ectologists are scholars, accustomed to the hard facts of Science, are you not? You were brought in by the Head Inspector to take empirical measurements of spectral activity. But that whole time you were mis-led by *him!"* My hands still bound behind me, I gestured with my head towards Peapoddy. "He was the 'ghost' this entire time. It was a setup from the beginning! Your partner died for a lie," I managed, before a heavy hand from behind clapped o'er the lower part of my face. My breath caught in my throat, and clammy skin sealed my nostrils. I sucked in hand-sweat.

It was hard to read Peapoddy's expression, standing as he was with the sun-lit window to his back, but even in the dimness of his shadow I thought I caught a grimace. "That is quite enough of your rabble-rousing," he snapped. "There was no hidden passage in the Library. The Tome of the Cowering Sigil was never there. You've hidden it—secreted it away, haven't you? And look"—here he knelt at Lara's side, her smooth, white skin a stark contrast to

the burbled meat of his scarred visage—"look at the good that book could do. She hovers here, between worlds, between life and death. The Tome holds between its covers the power to heal her." He stood. "And I have the lawful power to send you to death in an instant. What I want is what you want. You have but one play here."

I grunted from beneath the sweaty hand. Peapoddy gestured at the constable, and he let go; I gasped the sharp, antiseptic air. If my freedom would end before long anyway, I would make the fiend wait a moment as I heaved the breath of liberty while I could.

Before, he simply couldn't believe that I'd have torched the priceless Tome along with every other book in the building for no reason besides an abiding distrust of literacy. But the fact remained that I *had*. I felt no regret for burning the books (I'd do it again in a second, and in fact was severely tempted to set alight some of the paper-stacks here in the hospital room, if the result wouldn't have been such a commotion), but I was a bit sorry that I had no leverage to make this foppish bother simply *go away*. Would I ever be able to return to those happy-go-lucky days of bowl-the-artichoke in the parlour and stoke-the-munchkin in the bath? Or was that fey world gone forever?

I'd tried lying to Peapoddy before, and that had led most certainly to the ruinous state of affairs in which we now found ourselves. But the alternative that day would surely have been worse—I'd have been in irons, and all else to rot. He was right; I had only one play.

With a little embellishment to make it believable, of course. I took a breath and made it good.

"There was a passage underneath the Library—I'd found the servants diddling there once. Heard a noise in the night and thought it was oat-rats. Took me forever to find that cranny, so I figured on its being a secure hiding place for valuables. The Tome went in there at once, of course, along with many other priceless treasures from Uncle's travels—spiced ritual kerosene from Bangladesh; tins of Imperial celebration powder from Shanghai; a few oil-soaked rags the old man'd unwound from Cheops' sarcophagus.

See, I thought that chamber the most fire-proof room in the place." I watched Peapoddy's face carefully. He'd only believe my account if he drew the inevitable conclusion on his own. "It's possible that the Tome survived the blaze, but it would require a careful survey—"

"There was nothing there," he said curtly. "It was not on the grounds. Every constable on Waverly Hill sifted through those embers. Several suffered from smoke inhalation; one had a stroke and thinks he's a parakeet. They all looked like chimney-sweeps by the end of it—black and beggarly. And oh, they found plenty of amazing things within those gates—enough to hang you a dozen times a day for a fortnight. But," he hissed, "no Tome."

"Then it is lost," I said plainly.

His retort cut me to the quick: "Then so is she."

30: A DESPERATE PLAN.

BEHIND ME, THE WRENCHING GRASP OF the unseen constable threatened to rend my arms from their sockets. "Let off me, Peapoddy," I called, but Peapoddy only laughed, a terrifying chortle behind that mask of creamy, seared flesh. It reminded me of custard, the way it sloshed about in pocked waves. It reminded me of evil custard.

"You don't seem to understand," Peapoddy hissed, shifting his weight such that his looming shadow covered Lara's face. "If that book is gone, that means I have no use for you." If there was malice in his voice, I certainly detected it. In fact, it would be safe to say that malice crept from every corner of his sentence, wrapping its slimy tendrils around the words and coating them with a dark, bilious toxin. "As acting Solicitor-General, I hereby draw charges against you for...Oh, where to start. Foul acts of vulgarity. Craven acts of murder. Reckless assault and attempted injury to persons of the Law..."

And thusly he went on at great length—he'd clearly read my file. Despite his wretched nature, I could tell that drawing charges against me was a concession, at best; he would have been much happier using me as a tool to retrieve his precious Tome of the Cowering Sigil.

But the book was gone! And so my bargaining chips were spent. I craned my ears for any sounds of conflict from the Hospital hallway—would, perhaps, the rough-shackle Kipper crew come bounding to my rescue with force of arms, o'er-powering Peapoddy and his constables to spirit me away to freedom? I enlisted the sum total of my telepathic powers towards this end; sadly, I had no telepathic powers. I'd suspected as much, but figured it good for a go despite-wise.

"I will be conducting further investigations into your history," Peapoddy blathered on. He'd been talking now for the greater part of ten minutes, a grand oration on the depths of my depravity. The constable behind me began to nod off—I felt his grasp slip.

In an instant, I had my plan. "Do go on," I prodded, trying for that thin edge of sarcasm that would make him do exactly so just to spite me.

It worked—he redoubled his breath and launched into another volume of monologue. "Although normally I make a practise of nomadic mobility, offering my services hither and yon wherever I can be of most use to law enforcement—I have accepted the charge of acting Solicitor-General here precisely to see your foul deeds punished," he yammered. "How exactly did you come to assume ownership Wondermark Manor from your late Uncle M_____? Under what circumstances did the inheritance change hands? I intend to put this and other long-standing mysteries to rest." Vitriol fuelled his speech, splashing about the room with that noxious, blue-berry odour of hatred. Behind me, I felt the pressure on my wrists slacken entirely, and then slough off.

Like a felled timber, the constable fell heavily to one side. He tumbled head-long into the seated Ectologist, who'd also dipped

into briefly into slumber, and into what was at first blush quite the compromising position.

I sprang for the door, vaulting the bodies still fumbling to disentangle one from t'other; in two seconds I was in the hall-way and stealing a last glance back into the room.

"Get him, seize him, you fools!" Peapoddy cried, but both the constable and the Ectologist were on the ground now, tumbling about like clumsy lovers, each trying to regain his balance while trying not to touch the other. They flapped their mighty bodies like girls in a school-yard; for once, their bulk was a hindrance. Peapoddy was blocked by the men and by the Head Inspector's bed from the door—I let my gaze linger on Lara, searing that chalk-white face into my memory, before I forced myself to look away.

In the hall, the sailors and the Kippers were enjoying a rousing bout of spin-the-drunkard, having rustled up some grog from the medicine-cabinets. They let out a wild cheer as I came tearing down the hall-way; clearly, they'd made fast friends since I'd left them at one another's throats. (I would learn later that they'd teamed up against some busy-body surgeons who "couldn't take a punch worth bean-hills," and become battle-fast allies.)

"Get out of here, you fools, there's nothing for us here," I called, but my shouts were drowned by the rousing cries of that age-old sailors' pastime. The drunk-o'-the-moment stumbled trembling from lap to lap, where the soldiers tickled him to the point of vomit; then the last with clean breeches would stand to chug some more. It was a fine game in most surroundings, such as pubs or church, but probably not best-suited for the lobby of a hostile Hospital—and as my own breeches were already heartily coated with most sorts of filth, I would probably be considered ineligible.

I rushed to Josiah and fumbled for words—"We need to leave Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats. Secure passage to Dublin. I have to find—"

Too late: Peapoddy and the constables had sorted their limbs out, apparently; they tore into the great hall at full speed. "You

are all under arrest!" came the cry from those wobbly mounds of custardy face-meat.

The sailors stopped, mid-syllable if necessary, and turned as one hairy beast to Peapoddy.

Old Cap'n Narwhal, the leader of the scurvy crew, lifted the pipe from his teeth and squinted at Peapoddy. He held a chunky hand out to one side, and one of his mates placed in it a velvet bag festooned with gold embroidery. The Cap'n worked the satchel's leather tie, dumping an ivory eyeball into his wide palm—then screwed the white globe tightly into his socket.

"Is that Peapoddy I hear, then?" he rumbled, and the sailors murmured their murderous assent. "Peapoddy the mermaid, is it?"

Peapoddy's face drained of colour in an instant—his whole person took on the character of his crisp, white, foppy waist-coat.

"Yar, it be Peapoddy the mermaid, broke us for bilge-smugglin' back in the Straits o' Parcheesi," came a reedy voice from the depths of the crowd.

Cap'n Narwhal turned to me then, fixing me with that smooth white eye, an egg dipped in milk dipped into his head. "Peapoddy's givin' you trouble, then, lad, is he?"

I nodded. Cap'n Narwhal cracked a toothless grin. "Perfect," he said, and the sailors cracked their knuckles.

By the time Josiah, the Kippers and I stumbled outside, the sun was high in the Spring-time sky. We stretched our grime-caked clothes under the sun and basked nude in the park. Occasionally, various screams would resonate from the direction of the Hospital, but we paid them no mind; it was the Hospital, after all, where Modern Medicine was practised, and screams were the universal signal that techniques were having effect.

Josiah turned to me—"You mentioned Dublin earlier," he said. "I mainly blocked it out, because of my thing about Irishmen."

"There were two books," I replied. "The tome that Peapoddy was after, and its companion, its twin. The second book may still be out there. The Tome of the Precious Lore may hold the key to saving her life."

"But it'll involve dealing with Irishmen?" Josiah asked, his voice wavering with fear, his soft body echoing the motion.

I nodded slowly and seriously. This was not an expedition to take up lightly—we'd need fireproof gear at the least, and casks of Erin-repellent, and the requisite number of llamas would be expensive in the current economic climate. But I fixed my mind on that pale visage lying prone in my memory. For her, I would do anything, mostly.

"We'd better make quick about it,then," Josiah said, "before the Equinox. Before the loaming."

For the first time since the last time I'd killed a man, I felt myself smile. "So," I said, looking over at the tall pink sails of Cap'n Narwhal's jack-steamer, sitting low in the water with its cargo of beer-stones and clover-remover and leprechaun-traps—export items for Ireland, all—"where do you think we might find a crew?"

31: TAKING FLIGHT.

THE SAILORS CAROUSED OUT OF THE hospital, flush with victory. "A round for my men!" Cap'n Narwhal cried, apparently hoping a bar-keep was within earshot of the medical plaza. "Let's have a drink, what?"

"Cap'n," I shouted, forgetting my nudity in the haste to catch up. "Cap'n, please—I'd like to come with you on your voyage to Dublin."

"Welcome to't!" he cried merrily. "Many hands make f'r hardy swabbin'."

"Great!" I beamed. "Can we cast off now?"

At this, his face darkened. "I promised me men a drink, and I'd hate to deny that to 'em," he said. "Hate for you to be the one cooped up with'm after breakin' that news. Can't we wait till morning? Or two days, really—one t'chase the hangover an' one t'check the P.O. box, as we're not sure when we're back in this port."

"What's that rumbling?" I replied.

We looked up to see the street fill with carriages. Horses pounded the earth as if they were chasing God. Each carriage seemed stuffed to bursting with constables from neighbouring shires—Peapoddy and the magistrate had apparently called for reinforcements. The blue-coats began to indiscriminately seize any shabby-looking folks within reach of a billy-club; the Kippers weren't far from being next.

Nor the sailors. Cap'n Narwhal paused to weigh his options, but his crew, larcenous lots all I'm sure, made the decision for him. Before we could say 'jack-sprinkletoes' they'd made haste down the hill towards the harbour. "We'll see you down there," Narwhal said, "and from the looks o' that mob, me boys're fittin' to cast off with or without you."

I rushed back to where Josiah and the Kippers were gathering their clothes; we'd set them out to dry after washing ourselves in the Hospital's fountain. We'd found a fair bit of pocket-change in the fountain as well; the old man who'd spoken to the nurse in the Hospital was tying it up in a small purse. It looked awful with his shoes, but then the elderly never could accessorise. Also, his shoes were tin cans with twine tied 'round. I thought of my own favourite boots, still at the booter's, still held hostage by that loathsome chap who'd taken me to that bothersome political meeting some weeks back. At least I would have good reason to return to Easthillshire-borough-upon-Flats: to get my shoes back. Oh, and to save Lara, of course.

Suddenly a lunging figure in white filled my vision! At first I thought it was an angel, come to eat my soul with plum-jam and oyster-crackers. But I realised with alarm that it was Peapoddy—battered totally beyond recognition, save for a mad gleam in one remaining eye, and of course the torn but still-foppy clothes.

"You just won't die, will you?" I shouted as if I'd had anything to do with his latest beating, then catching his full weight as he fell. I strained to stop us both from tumbling down the long cliff-face towards the harbour. Down below, the ship was being readied

for sail; it would have to raise anchor within minutes, before losing the advantage of the tide. Behind Peapoddy, constables fought with Kippers; street-whelps and the urchin-class were getting in on the act as well. Before the hour was done it would be full-out street-war. That ship was my last chance for escape.

"The *last* place you should try to kill somebody," Peapoddy sneered, "is at a hospital!"

He whipped his arms about like a Chinaman, working some bizarre fighting-style that made him look quite more daft than even he could normally manage. While I ridiculed his stance, he dealt me three smart blows to the clavicles. A deadly gleam crowned his clouded eye as I stumbled towards the cliff-edge.

Blow after fearsome blow, he battered down my defences, driving me from my feet. It didn't help that I was naked; it surely didn't help that I didn't really want to touch his gross, pus-oozing body. But even as droplets of his viscera flecked all over me, I managed one low strike that took his knees from under him—at this he fell heavily to the ground with a sour thump and the soft squelch of floppy flesh.

I rubbed mud into his wounds. He threw pollen at my face, trying to make me sneeze. I did. We fought as men did in the first days of the Earth.

He tore me up good, I'm ashamed to say. Oh, my fortune for a croquet-mallet! But none materialised. "Where's your tome now?" Peapoddy cried, over and over. "Where's your precious healing tome now?"

I was done for. His meaty fingers dragged me to the edge of the cliff and forced me to look down at the ship, where lines were being tossed with gusto, the poop deck was frantically being re-pooped, and nautical-type stuff was happening everywhere. "They're leaving you behind," he hissed. "Looks like I get you all to myself."

He stood tall above me and raised a huge stone over my head. I squeezed my eyes closed. "I'm sorry oh please I didn't mean it oh please I'm so sorry," I think I may have said.

But nothing happened.

"I'm really sorry," I added, just to be sure.

Still nothing. The only sound was a squeaky gull o'er the water.

I squeezed one eye back open just a small, apologetic crack.

He was gone.

I stood up. He was nowhere to be found.

And then—I smelled the cheese.

Abu Fromage's spiced blend. I'd know the smell in my grave. The first time it blessed me, I'd been in the Himalayas, outside Abu Fromage's monastery. I'd had but a wisp of a waft of a glimmer of a sniff. But it had been enough for a life-time.

The second time had been here, in the fœtid alleys of East-hillshireborough-upon-Flats. But that had just been a mouldy leper in a barrel, hadn't it?

Hadn't it?

I'd driven myself to vinegar-baths rather than entertain that notion. But I'd smelled it again, just this morning. It had led me to the Kippers.

To the old man with the coin-purse.

Abu Fromage was here.

He had saved me.

I didn't know where he'd gone, or what he'd done with Peapoddy. It was a mystery I would entertain another day—the ship, far below, was drawing anchor.

I scrambled down the narrow cliff-path, nudity flopping around as nudity tends to, and watched the ship slowly pull up gang-plank and drift away from the dock, picking up speed—too far to catch, now too far to even jump—

Josiah appeared at the stern. I surprised myself by feeling pleased that he'd made it aboard. "Wait!" he cried to the crew, seeing me. But they didn't; they couldn't.

I made it to the board-walk, bare feet slapping the wet wood, shoving through thick shouting mobs of cheese-twirlers and crab-smashers and rat-juicers and tourists, until my feet danced in open air—I was falling.

I hit the water full-on. The shock of the cold took my breath. The deep stole all light, and I felt nothing.

Then strong hands pulled me on board. I vomited o'er the railing as soon as I found my feet, praying that somehow, some of that floating offal might find its way into Peapoddy's bed-chamber and befoul his pillow-shams. But I knew this was a fool-hardy dream.

As the foul puddle crested the horizon and faded from view, I turned to my stupid nephew Josiah and placed a manly hand on his girlish shoulder. "Made it," I said. "Knew I could."

The wind caught the sails and we began to pick up speed, leaving Easthillshireborough-upon-Flats behind. I saw Waverly Hill in the distance, still capped by a red cloud of ash. I hoped I was doing the right thing. I knew I had no other choice. I also noted the breeze; I wondered if I could dig up some clothes somewhere.

"We'll be spending a lot of time together on this voyage, I reckon," Josiah said, and just as my spirit fell at the prospect, he added: "I hope you'll teach me all you know about being a true gentleman of class! For what a foolish ninny I've been!"

"The first thing you'll have to learn is how to kill a man carelessly," I said. "It's all part of growing up."

He broke out in a grin. Maybe the chap wasn't so bad after all. And if he annoyed me too much I could always just chuck him overboard—if the sailors didn't stick him on a peg 'fore we made open water.

Cap'n Narwhal came up behind the both of us. I hadn't noticed before, but he had hooks for both hands—and, looking down, I saw he had hooks for feet as well. I didn't comment on the roundish, pointy bulge in his pantaloons; not being familiar with the cut of his particular jib, it might have just been an odd wrinkle.

My mind worked unbidden, remembering how I'd taken over the Manor from my uncle by a shrewd combination of guile and what my analyst had labelled 'sociopathic tendency' (though I hadn't asked what that meant before shoving his cravat down his gullet). I idly wondered what the months at sea ahead would

bring—if, somehow, through some unlikely happenstance or some (equally likely) boredom-spurred act of causeless malice—if I would, in fact, find myself in command of this sailing ship.

"Welcome to the sea, lads," the cap'n said.

I nodded meaningfully, to give the impression of considered thought.

But to myself, I appended: *Welcome to the good ship Wondermark.*

Author's Note.

IF YOU HAVE ENJOYED THE TALES I HAVE recounted, may I kindly suggest that you be examined by a medical professional at once?

However, should you discover, upon doing so, that there simply *is no cure* (as I have so discovered), I would recommend for your further enjoyment Volumes II and III of the tale thus begun. The *Compleat Trilogy,* a full *five hundred pages* of this nonsense, can be found in both print and ebook flavours at the following cyber-space ænternet Web-Site online address: WONDERMARK.COM/DISPATCHES

It is my hope that you will find this further reading pleasing. And of course—comrades and friends who are zealous for Wondermark can do it a valuable service by disabusing the minds of indifferent person who think it is specially for old curmudgeons, and assuring them it is of to-day, pulsating with full life in accord with the times. The careful reading of Wondermark and its related documents are the window to a richer life, beating with the fine vigour of the determined, and any citizen may take a full measure of its benefits simply by directing a computer at the web-address WONDERMARK.COM, even if a farmer and remote from any rail-road.

The readers of “ Wondermark ” will be glad to learn that a prose volume by the same author has just been brought out. The selections are thirty-one in number, and have a quaintness which is genuine and charming.

It is needless to say that these have been among the most popular tales that have lately been written. The present collection shows that the author can be successful in other milieux than those which have gained him so much critical praise and such wide popularity.

Dispatches from Wondermark Manor is constantly growing in the estimation of the public, and even those who are, in general, averse to story-reading have been unable to resist the fascination of this, acknowledged to be one of the best collections of tales which we have had for years.